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Black John, The Road-Agent; OR, THE OUTLAW'S RETREAT.

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AUTHOR OF "YELLOWSTONE JACK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN ADVENTURE UPON THE ROAD.

SWAYING heavily from side to side, and creaking uneasily, as though protesting against such rough usage, the stage-coach lumbered down the steep bank. The sweat-marked leaders tore through the narrow, shallow creek-bed, anticipating the cutting lash, as they gallantly breasted the abrupt, rocky, rain-gutted ascent that led to the fair, rolling prairie beyond.

"As nasty a ford as you kin easy find," quoth Ben Cockles, the swart-browed driver, as his animals settled down into a steady, swinging trot. "Chaw, strangers!"

Two of the three "outsides" declined; the other, a tall, lithe borderer, with long black locks streaming elfishly about his thin, shrewd countenance—lazily gnawed a chunk from off the proffered plug.

"It used to be a nastier hole, though, in the time o' Ham Murden," the long man drawled. "That was Monte Pete's corral—whar he ginerally went through the coach whenever he thought it wuth while."

"I reckon you ain't a stranger in these parts, then?" and Cockles darted a quick glance at the speaker from beneath his shaggy eyebrows.

"Not much. I war 'long when Ham went under, back thar, two year gone by—the time Monte Pete passed in his checks. See, this is how the varmint spilt my beauty," and the man chuckled grimly as he traced with his finger a deep scar upon his cheek, half-hidden by the shaggy beard. "But I raised his pile, an' he caved."

"Then you're Curly?"

"Folks do call me that, sometimes."

"It's a good enough name, but I reckon you'd better change it while you stay in these parts. Let Black John strike your trail, an' I wouldn't give a continental cuss fer your chaine."

"I've heard tell o' the varmint," quietly replied Curly. "But I don't know what grudge he kin hev ag'inst me."

"It's well know'd all over the line, so I kin tell yer. This feller, Black John he's called, beca'se he's a nigger, was with Monte Pete that time. What they was to each other, I don't know, but I jedge they was extry good fri'nds, fer some time a'terward thar war a lot o' bills stuck up 'long the line, offerin' a thousand dollars ef any one would tell whar Curly, or Israel Tostivan, could be found. Black John was the name signed to it. I've been stopped twice, the past year, by fellers what axed for Curly, but when they didn't find him, they left us slide."

"Then there is such a person as this Black John?" asked a young man, booked upon the way-bill as Kent Morgan. "And he is a Road-Agent?"

"Jest as I tell you, stranger. But I reckon he don't mean to bother us on this trip, or we'd seen him afore."

"What would you have done in case he had made his appearance?"

"What else but let him work his will?"

"What? There are two young ladies now inside, in a measure under your care. And you would allow them to be plundered—perhaps insulted, or still worse—by these rascals, without raising a helping hand?" somewhat hotly cried Morgan.

"Don't git your back up 'thout cause, stranger. Look how I be. I run this route every day, year in an' year out. It's the way I live. Half the time I only hev the mails to kerry. Then git the Road-Agents down on me, an' whar'd be my show? I wouldn't hev a smell. A shot from the tall grass or bresh—an' thar I'd be. I don't think I'm a coward, but I'd be a pesky fool to run my head ag'inst a bullet, jest fer nothin'." sullenly replied Cockles.

"There'd be no need of his help, on this trip," drawled the third passenger, as he drew a tiny Smith & Wesson seven-shooter from his bosom, gingerly handling it. "I am armed, as I perceive you two gentlemen are."

"What mought you call that, stranger?" asked Curly.

"A revolver, sir."

"Do tell! I thought it looked like a 'tatur pop-gun."

"Sir, the weapon is rather diminutive in size, but as a destructive engine, of almost marvelous power. Why, sir, with that weapon I killed a bull-bison at a single shot, in the White Mountains. I paced the distance afterward—just two hundred yards, sir."

"I pass, stranger. You're too big a shooter fer me. I reckon you're a preacher's son, ain't ye?"

"No, sir; my name is Kershaw—Frank Kershaw. There is my card. As you see, I am in the real estate business; cash capital, ten million. As a secret, sir, I don't mind telling you, I am now looking up a bit of land—one hundred miles square—that I purchased of the Government some time ago. I had forgotten all about it until last month. It's so troublesome, you know, to remember all these trifles," drawled Kershaw, caressing his pet mutton-chop whiskers.

"Then you ain't in the gold-minin' business?"

"No, not now. I sold all my shares in the California mines. It was too slow work fer me."

"I mean the Kansas placers. Talk 'bout Californy—why, that ain't nowher! Now, I could tell you of a mine that I've run, that would make you open your eyes; but I told it once, and a chuckle-headed fellow up an' called it a lie. Of course, thar war a subject waitin'."



THE ROAD-AGENT'S ATTACK.

fer a crowner's 'quest, right off; but sech little matters kinder throw me off my feed, like, an' I don't keer 'bout exposin' myself to bein' even *thunk* a liar."

"But I am really interested, and as I profess to be a gentleman, you need fear no such comments on my part. And then, perhaps we can arrange—but of that we can speak hereafter."

"Wal, I'll give it to ye kinder easy, at fust, an' tell of one o' my *little* placers. Jest at sun-riz', one day this spring, I tuck my ox-wagon an' driv down to the place. I worked mighty steady all forenoon, beca'se I war out o' tobacco an' powder an' wanted some change to go shop-pin' with. I didn't lift my head to see how full a war gittin' the bed, ontel noon. Then I started up the ox critters. They jist laid down to it, but couldn't budge the wagons. The gold hed sunk the wheels in the solid airth, plumb down to the hubs. So, you see, I hed to pitch out purty nigh half o' the dornicks ag'in. I manidged to git the outfit up to the cabin, a'ter pullin' the wagon-tongue out two or three times."

"But the—you didn't leave the rest of the gold lying there exposed, did you?" eagerly asked Kershaw.

"Yes—but I'm goin' to rope it next week, ef it don't rain. Now you don't want to think that this is the *best* placer I've got, fer it's only one o' my youngest ones, an' the stuff hain't sca'cely hed time to grow yit."

"Thar comes the wet, strangers," cried Cockles. "Reckon you'd better pile inside, hedn't ye?"

For an hour or more a huge mass of black clouds had been sweeping down from the north-west, and the air was growing rapidly cooler. Now, afar off over the rolling prairie, could be seen a dense, whitish, mist-like sheet as the rain-flood swept nearer. Joined to the sullen booming of the thunder, whose peals were now almost incessant, the scene was anything but agreeable to a novice, and, as Cockles reined in his steaming horses, the two younger men hastily descended and entered the coach.

The back seat was already occupied by two passengers, of a class not often met with in the stage-coach of that date. They were both young ladies, neatly but plainly attired, and from their smiles, as the men entered, it would seem they were mutually acquainted. Yet, two days before they met for the first time. Since then they had been companions in traveling, and under no circumstances are acquaintances more quickly made, or characters read.

May Howard and Eunice Lee were life-long friends and acquaintances. Eunice, though an orphan, had found a father in Thomas Howard, a distant relative of her mother. For two years past the girls had been at boarding-school in the East. Now they were returning home for a visit.

Both were more than usually comely, endowed with considerable good sound common sense, though not yet past their *teens*. May was a *brune*, a trifle the tallest, of a round, lithe form; Eunice a blonde, slighter in build, seemingly more fragile.

More or less all were affected by the coming storm. Morgan quickly secured the curtain upon the more exposed side, and then spoke a cheering word to his fair companions. A cheery laugh replied, for the maidens had not yet forgotten their prairie experience of bygone days.

His head bowed to the increasing blast, Cockles drove rapidly on. Behind him, crouching down among the mail-bags and other articles of baggage strapped upon the deck, was Curly, jealously shielding his revolvers from the fierce, pelting rain. Snorting angrily, the full-spirited horses dashed on, shaking the drops in torrents from their steaming sides, the lumbering coach rocking and swaying from side to side like some storm-tossed vessel.

For full an hour the uncouth vehicle rumbled on through the storm, uninterrupted. A long, dark belt of trees and undergrowth loomed up more and more distinct, extending at right-angles with the trail. Cockles bowed his head still more, and rode on with increased speed, but from beneath his shaggy brows, he kept casting quick, uneasy glances around, as though ill at ease.

"That ought to be Little Wildcat, jest ahead thar," uttered Curly, shaking back the now dripping *chevelure* that had given him his sobriquet.

"So it is—an' I wish we was well over it, too. It's the devil an' all a'ter a big rain," growled Cockles.

"Ef it's only the crick to bother us, we won't hev much trouble, I reckon."

"What do you mean by *only*?" quickly demanded Cockles.

"Didn't you say Black John was lookin' fer me? Ef he is, thar's the last chauce he'll hev to size my pile, sence I stop at Barrett's."

"Mebbe he don't know you're on this trip?"

"Better fer us both ef he didn't. It'll save powder," was the quiet reply.

"You don't mean fight? Why he never rides onless he hes a full dozen dar'-devils 'ith him! They'd massacre the entire kit o' us at the first blow you struck," cried Cockles, with an uneasy air.

"Curly Tostivan don't lay down to give the fust feller what axer it, his skelp. Them'll be fooled who think that. Mobbe my life ain't wuth much, but it's the best I've got," and he chuckled at the idea.

Cockles said no more, for the leaders plunged into the undergrowth that here brushed both sides of the coach, his voice ringing out clearly to warn the inside passengers of an abrupt descent. And then, seemingly about to topple over upon the slipping horses, the coach plunged down the guttered bank, and into the muddy, roaring waters of Little Wildcat Creek.

With a fierce oath, Ben Cockles jerked up the plunging animals, throwing the leaders almost upon their haunches, forcing the wheelers back against the coach, and then the old coach settled down in the middle of Little Wildcat ford, threatening with every moment to yield to the mad rush of the waters, to be swept over the uneven rocky ledge, and carried into the deeper waters below.

There was little occasion to ask the meaning of this action upon the driver's part. At the same moment each one of the five passengers realized the truth. There could be no mistaking that command.

From the rocky side of the western bank echoed a sharp, spiteful report—the voice of a revolver. A ragged bullet whistled unpleasantly near to Cockles's head, causing a peculiar thrill to creep along his spinal column. He knew that this bullet was but a warning for him to halt; should he refuse, the next missile would probably pierce his brain or heart. So, throwing all his skill and strength into the effort, he checked his snorting animals, even as a stentorian voice rung out, high above the roar of Little Wildcat:

"Halt! You carry property there that belongs to Black John!"

All was confusion within the coach. The abrupt halt, despite their efforts, flung May and Eunice from their seats forward upon their fellow-travelers. For a moment the crazy vehicle stood almost on end; but then settling down more like a sober stage-coach, the crumpled passengers quickly disentangled themselves, and, as they accomplished this, the ringing summons came to their ears.

The girls shrieked faintly—Kent Morgan uttered a low curse; but the valiant Kershaw was silent. Kent thrust a fist through the closed curtain, his revolver clicking significantly. As though in answer to the cries of the women, the commanding voice from the side of the ford added:

"Have no fear, ladies. Black John wars only with those of his own sex."

With the words a single man leaped lightly down the rocky bank, alighting in the water, knee-deep. In one hand he carried a revolver. Another showed at his waist. A little cry of wonder parted Kent Morgan's lips, as he peered through the rent curtain. And little wonder, for truly this man was a strange-looking being.

The being seemed beyond the usual hight of man, of truly Herculean build. His garb was mostly composed of Indian dressed buck-skin, gaudily ornamented, and bedecked with beads, stained quills and feathers. Upon his hands were riding gloves, the fur gauntlets reaching to the elbow. A felt hat was slouched over his face. From beneath this there fell a profusion of coarse, wrinkly black hair. The face was in color that of a full-blooded negro, but with features horribly grotesque and misshapen. A great hairy wart disfigured the right cheek. The mouth was large, with red, swollen lips, drawn far down upon the left side, where a broad, purplish scar extended from eye to chin. Uneven, discolored teeth, that might almost be termed tusches, showed through the coarse, bristling beard and mustache.

There could be no mistaking the person. This man was the notorious outlaw, Black John, upon whose head was placed almost a fortune in rewards; the man who, for two years past, had set both civil and military powers at defiance—whose very name was a terror to all peace-loving settlers.

"My lads," said Black John, slightly turning his head as he spoke, "keep your places, and offer these people no harm unless they attempt to make mischief. Now, Ben Cockles," he added, addressing the driver, speaking in a strangely musical voice in one so repulsive, "who have you along with you on this trip?"

"Two ladies—three men," was the prompt reply.

"The ladies—God bless the divine creatures! shall pass scot-free, but the rest of you must pay toll, for our pockets are nearly empty. By the way, lads, just show yourselves, that our friends may see the folly of attempting resistance."

Like magic, nearly a dozen men rose from their coverts, their revolvers covering the coach. Over their faces were black masks, upon their hands, gloves. Evidently their object was to avoid recognition. Then, as Black John waved his hand, the band as suddenly disappeared from view.

"You see, gentlemen, I am not trying to bluff you. If you accept the situation quietly, all right; if not, the fault lies with you. Toll you *must* pay—but 'tis a rule with us to leave every one enough dust to keep his pockets from flapping in the wind. But first—Cockles!"

The driver grunted uneasily.

"Have you with you a passenger by the name of *Curly*—or *Israel Tostivan*?"

"Hyar I be, my covey—'ith four aces for your pile!" cried a clear voice, the last words partially drowned by a sharp, ringing report as a revolver spoke from the coach roof.

Black John staggered back, dropping his pistol, and then fell at full length in the muddy water, one hand clasped to his breast.

At the first summons Curly had flattened himself along the coach deck, hidden from the Road-Agent's view by the numerous packages before alluded to, that could not be stowed away upon the crowded rack behind. And from this covert he had answered the demand of Black John.

Without waiting to note the result of his shot, Curly turned his pistol toward the driver, fiercely crying:

"Drive on, Cockles, or you're a dead galoot!"

Even had surly Ben dared refuse obedience, he could not have done so, for the now thoroughly maddened horses plunged forward with a vigor that strained every band and buckle, almost dragging the driver over the footboard. The lines snapped like bits of packthread—the crazy vehicle rocked and swayed as the affrighted animals madly tore up the slippery trail.

For a moment the outlaws seemed petrified by the unexpected fall of their leader, but then as he struggled to his feet with a hoarse cry of rage, their revolvers spoke rapidly, sending a leaden hail after the coach. From the roof, Curly's pistol promptly replied. Through the rent curtain Kent Morgan added his share to the thrilling tumult; but the jolting, swaying coach prevented any thing like an aim.

"After them—to your horses!" yelled Black John, furiously. "Kill every one but the women. I'll shoot the one that harms a hair o' their heads!"

"Use the whip, Ben Cockles," gritted Curly, sternly. "Don't show the white feather now, or I'll plug ye—shore! The road's good, an' the critters 'll make for thar stables, it's like. Anyhow, ef we fall into *his* hands, we're gone suckers. Use the leather, man!"

Pale and trembling, Cockles knew better than to disobey, and with a hand that even then did not forget its cunning, he plied the long-lashed whip, waking the echoes with pistol-like cracks as the wiry lash cut first one and then another of the racing animals, parting the hide like a knife. As though trying to run through their harness, the horses darted forward, carrying the coach over the almost level road with a truly wonderful speed. The station was now not more than five miles away. Until that was reached the road was good, broken only by the gentle swelling of the rolling prairie. And to the maddened brutes the weight of the coach seemed but a trifle, as they stretched out flat to the springy turf, running like race-horses, the broken lines flopping over their backs. There was a peculiar exhilaration in this mad, breakneck race—but how was it to end? Could the result be other than death?

"You fellers inside thar—how goes it? Any one hurt?" inquired Curly, bending over the rail.

"I believe not—but yonder come those devils!"

"I see 'em. Whar's that buffalo-shootin' feller? I hain't heard nothin' o' him yit. It's like he'll hev a chance to try his pop-gun now," and Curly laughed recklessly.

"He's under the seat—where he's been from the first," replied Morgan, in a tone of contemptuous disgust.

"I'm hunting for—for my pistol," the valiant Kershaw explained, in a not very steady tone of voice.

Curly's laugh rung out clearly, as he tossed back his long hair. A bitter, vindictive yell replied from the lips of Black John, as he spurred his horse on, closely followed by his men. Yet, though finely mounted, they gained but slowly on the coach, that, drawn by four stanch animals, almost flew across the prairie.

"Don't waste your powder, young feller," cried Curly, coolly. "It'll only be a little brush, for we're not fur from Barrett's, an' the noise'll soon fetch us help from thar. But keep the ladies low down, whar the baggage'll keep the bullets from them."

A mile further on, the pistols of the Road-Agents began to speak viciously. But discharged as they were at full speed, the missiles were but little better than chance shots. Tauntingly Tostivan's laugh rung out, maddening his deadly enemy.

Snarling like a wild beast, so full of rage and fear that his prey was slipping through his hands, Black John mercilessly spurred on his horse, a noble creature. Neighing with pain, the beast rapidly overhauled the fugitives. All but one of the Road-Agents were distanced. Better mounted than the rest, the man kept close to his leader's heels.

Both Curly and Morgan opened fire, but their bullets sped wide of the mark. The swaying of the coach rendered their aim futile, and the outlaws drew steadily nearer, as yet making no attempt to return the fire, until within a score yards of the coach.

Then the revolvers were raised. At almost the first report a shriek of agony filled the air, and a human figure rolled from the coach-deck. It was Ben Cockles. He lay in a quivering heap, but he did not feel the fall. He was shot through the brains.

"You're my man, Curly Tostivan—remember Monte Pete!" snarled Black John.

"You'll be toastin' 'longside him at the same fire this night, my covey!" retorted the tall borderer. "Thar comes our friends!"

"But not soon enough to save you!"

With these words Black John forged up alongside the coach. Both pistols spoke at the same moment. An involuntary cry broke from Curly and the outlaw. Then other reports followed. The next moment both outlaws were down! And Curly uttered another exultant yell.

Two miles away, upon a prairie swell, he could see a body of horsemen, whom he believed to be friends. But would they be in time to save them from destruction? The coach threatened to upset with every moment. At such a speed the result could scarcely be otherwise than fatal.

A glance back showed him the Road-Agents clustered about the fallen forms. He knew that nothing more was to be feared from them then. If the horsemen beyond were friends, the outlaws would have to ride fast to save their own lives.

"Git ready in thar for a upset, if I fail," he cried, coolly, prepared for a desperate attempt to avert the impending peril.

Crawling to the foot-board, he calculated his chances. The chances were greatly against him. To fail could be nothing less than death, instant and certain. And yet he did not shrink from the trial. Though unconscious of the fact, Curly was a hero.

For a moment balancing himself, Curly leaped down upon the back of the wheeler, clinging to the harness like a monkey. The animal crouched low down, then with a cry of terror, plunged forward, snapping both traces like packthread. A strong hand now wound in the reins, and after a brief, thrilling struggle, the animal was held in check. A moment later, Curly had both the leading lines tight wrapped round his hands, and the greatest danger was passed. Gradually he checked their mad speed, until, as the horsemen swept up, he brought them to a stand-still.

The Road-Agents were just disappearing in the distance, and though pursuit was instantly made, the prospect of overtaking them was small. In their flight they had borne their dead with them.

While the few who remained behind were placing the body of the ill-fated Cockles upon the coach, Kent Morgan was narrowly searching the ground. Presently he eagerly picked up a small object, quickly hiding it in his bosom, unobserved. Then, as if his object was fully attained, he returned to where the ladies stood.

With Curly upon the box-seat, though he was

slightly wounded in the shoulder by Black John's last shot, the coach rolled on to Barrett's, where an excited crowd awaited its coming.

That night Frank Kershaw was in his glory, telling how "we defeated the rascally Road-Agents!"

CHAPTER II.

BLACK JOHN'S CHALLENGE.

THE little dingy bar-room of Barrett's sole "hotel"—as the swinging sign boldly proclaimed the rude story-and-a-half building to be—contained a much larger number of people than it usually gave shelter to, on the morning of the day succeeding the Road-Agents' attack upon the coach at Little Wildcat. Yet the chubby little man presiding behind the rough pine bar did not seem happy. The freshly-washed glasses were innocent of alcoholic scent—the stout bottles were still full to the throat. The sturdy settlers had something of even deeper importance to talk about.

The news of the attack and defeat of the Road-Agents had spread like wildfire, and eager to learn the truth of the affair, the farmers and stock-breeders left their work, flocking into Barrett's. This was the first time for nearly a year that the stage-coach had been waylaid along this stretch. And when it was known that Ben Cockles had been killed, deep and deadly threats were breathed, and, as if by common consent, the settlers collected at Barrett's to consult upon the best course to pursue. Then, as had been the case before, the subject of organizing a *vigilance committee* was broached.

"I don't say but what you're right, strangers," said Curly, upon being appealed to for an opinion. "Ef you kin git the right man to lead, a vigilance outfit is a hard pill fer sech varmints to swallow, as this Black John's boys be. But the trouble is, in matters like this, each man's as good as his neighbor, an' thar's jest as many leaders as thar is noses in the crowd."

"Will you take the office, then?" said Thomas Harvard.

"No, I won't. I don't mind lendin' a helpin' hand, ef it's needed, but I've got business o' my own to tend to. Besides, I'm a stranger to most o' you."

"Don't forget that you promised to tell me more about gold-placers, Curly," eagerly whispered Frank Kershaw. "If it's as you say, there's money in it."

"But, if I understand aright, this man—Black John I believe you call him—was killed yesterday," observed one of the party, a stranger.

He had arrived at Barrett's shortly after dusk, the night before, riding along the Denver trail. Owing to the excitement, he had been but little noticed by the usually curious settlers, yet he was a man that few persons would pass without turning for a second glance.

In stature, he was but little above the medium height, lithely, elegantly formed, with a supple grace in every movement that was a charm in itself. His dress was plain, though of costly material. In his linen front gleamed diamond studs. An elegant chain crossed his vest. A beautiful diamond cluster-ring sparkled upon his left hand, that now caressed his smooth-shorn chin. His close-trimmed hair was jetty black, covered by a military forage cap. His face, almost classic in its contour, was very handsome, though wearing a firm, self-reliant expression, that redeemed it from effeminacy. His eyes were large and of peculiar brilliancy, seeming to pierce through and through those upon whom their regards were turned. He had given the name of Wayne Appleton, just from Denver, bound for Fort Leavenworth. Though he had not stated as much, the impression was that he was in some way connected with the secret service, at Leavenworth.

"I don't believe the man was killed," quietly observed Kent Morgan. "His horse was shot, and stumbling, flung its rider. If I mistake not, we shall hear more of this affair."

"The varmint has got as many lives as a cat," disgustedly said Curly. "Ef I didn't plant two bullets plum whar his heart ought to be, I'm a liar!"

"It would not be the first time that a secret coat of mail stopped a well-aimed bullet. I thought of that after your shot at the ford, and gave my last bullet at his head," said Morgan.

"But you missed him?" asked Appleton.

"No—I made a mark," was the quiet reply.

"A good clew to work by, then. A negro, shot in the face, can not be easily mistaken."

"If so marked—yes. But I am not sure that my bullet touched his face, any more than I am that this Black John is a negro."

A general exclamation of surprise greeted this remark, but Kent Morgan stilled the gathering with a gesture. Then he addressed Curly:

"You had a fair view of this Black John?"

"Yes—why shouldn't I?"

"Did you notice his right cheek?"

"Yes. He had a great big thing like a wart growin' thar, kivered with hair. The size of a peach split in two, I should judge," thoughtfully added Tostivan.

"You have a keen eye, Curly," and Kent laughed shortly, as he tossed something upon the low bar. "There is the wart, just as you described it. You can see where my bullet left its mark."

As one man, the settlers pressed forward, Appleton among the foremost. But his was the only hand that offered to touch the curious-looking object. In size and shape it closely resembled a full-grown tarantula, deprived of its legs.

"You choose a rather inopportune moment for your practical jokes, Mr. Morgan," slowly uttered Appleton, dropping the object, with a gesture of disgust.

"If a jest, 'tis none of my making. Gentlemen, that is an imitation wart, made of paste and silk, but it is the one worn by Black John, as he terms himself, yesterday afternoon. When I saw that he was proof against our bullets when aimed at his body, I fired at his head. I saw him start, and then something fell to the ground, leaving a clear white spot upon his cheek! This I saw plainly, as I turned to attend to the other rascal. Him I shot through the body, just as Curly dropped the leader. After the affair was over, I went back and searched the ground carefully, finding this mock wart, or wen. Put this and that together, and what is the result? That the outlaw is no negro, but a white man. And, beyond a doubt, this fact has been his greatest safeguard against discovery, for only a negro was looked for. It is easy to see now how he escaped so often. Indeed, when his disguise is once cast aside, what is there to prevent him from mingling among you—even sharing in your councils, aiding you to form plots and lay snares for his own destruction, laughing in his sleeve, all the time, at the double role he is playing? It is nothing more than a bold, quick-witted man might do, with very little danger to himself."

"Just so—supposing him to be what you suspect; and I do not deny that you have grounds for your reasoning—but is it likely that so many persons could have been deceived so thoroughly, and for such a long time?"

Kent Morgan turned quickly toward the speaker. Appleton met his gaze quietly; but the words of the young man were checked by the rapid beat of horse's hoofs along the road without. Instinctively, all eyes were directed toward the open doorway.

The shape of a horse and its rider abruptly halted at the door, so close that the long mane of the animal floated inside the room. The rider made a rapid motion with his right arm. A heavy, peculiar *thud* followed. Then with a single, low, taunting laugh, the vision vanished.

A ten-inch bowie-knife was quivering in the door-casing, a sheet of paper fluttering upon the bright blade. And above the clattering of iron-shod hoofs, the insolent laugh came to the ears of the astounded settlers.

The affair had been so sudden, so unexpected, that the borderers could scarcely believe their eyes. And yet, scarce one among the party but had caught sight of a black, repulsive face, as the horseman glared in upon them.

"BLACK JOHN, BY THE LORD HARRY!"

The words were Appleton's, as he sprung across the threshold, and into the open air. The spell was broken, and the entire party quickly followed.

The daring horseman was now nearly clear of the village, and turning in his saddle, he shook his clenched fist at the party, uttering a loud peal of insolent laughter that stung the settlers to fury.

A score of revolvers began to speak, but, riding erect, as though despising them, Black John quickly passed beyond pistol-range. Seeing this, the farmers leaped upon such horses as were standing ready-saddled near at hand, and set out in hot pursuit. Still others ran afoot, until the folly of such a course cooled their blood, when they rejoined those gathered around Kent Morgan, as he read the knife-pierced paper. On it was written, in bold, clear characters:

"TO MY DEAR FRIENDS OF BARRETT'S—GREETING: Some time past you have been threatening to organize a company of *vigilantes*, for the express purpose

of wiping out the band I have the honor to captain. As I am curious to learn whether you are *really* men, I make this proposition. To-morrow, at noon, I will be in camp at the Twin Mounds, having just twenty-one men. I shall remain there until sunset, ready to receive and entertain visitors.

"I send this challenge, because your boasts and threats of what you *would* do—if you were able—are growing monotonous. Do not fetch less than forty men, as my lads wish something to liven them up. Now, *dare* you accept this challenge?"

"These, from your master,

"BLACK JOHN, THE ROAD-AGENT."

"'Twould be no easy matter to find words by which to express the wild storm of rage and fury that followed the reading of this precious document. A biting, stinging insult from first to last, the manner in which this bold defiance had been delivered added to the humiliation. Curses, loud and deep, broke from the sturdy settlers, weapons were drawn and brandished, and for a few moments it seemed as though the entire party were gone suddenly mad.

Again the clatter of hoofs rung through the little village, but as the crowd glanced quickly along the road, they recognized a friend and neighbor. As he abruptly drew rein beside them, the man suddenly demanded:

"Whar's Tom Goodheart—any o' you fellers know?"

"What's up now, Ike? You look as though you had seen a ghost!" asked Howard.

"You seen my brother?" hoarsely repeated the man.

"Not since the first of the week. But there's nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Yest'day Tom started fer here, but he didn't git back last night. This mornin' I see'd his critter in the corral, whar she'd jumped in, the saddle kivered with blood. I set the boys to work, lookin' fer sign an' kem on here to see ef I could larn anythin'."

Ike Goodheart spoke in a low, strained and unnatural voice, and there was a strange look upon the hard, rugged face, as the settlers, knowing the deep, almost passionate love that bound the brothers together, read aright the sickening dread that even the stoical borderer could not entirely mask. The story of the bloody saddle told of yet another black tragedy to be added to the almost endless catalogue of crimes and bloodshed that stain the annals of Kansas, both as a Territory and as a State.

"Some more work of Black John, beyond a doubt!" cried Wayne Appleton. "Men, how long are you going to submit to this—how much longer are you going to allow this devil and his imps to ride rough-shod over you? I am a stranger to most of you here, but I am ready to lend you what aid I can. I will be one to pledge my life and honor never to cease the hunt until this gang of outlaws is broken up and destroyed."

A general cry greeted this declaration, and it was evident that not the slightest objection to such a decided course was felt now, whatever might have been the case a few minutes since. For a time all was confusion, each man talking, none listening; but then, as another horseman came spurting along the road, followed by Ike Goodheart, the tumult died away, for by his face—the manner in which the new-comer turned toward Goodheart, they knew that he was the bearer of evil tidings.

"You needn't say it, Hank," the brother uttered, in a strained, husky tone. "Whar is he?"

"By Little Timber—thrown in his tracks," was the terse reply.

"Friends," said Goodheart, speaking in a strangely quiet tone, "you hear what Hank says. Brother Tom hes bin rubbed out. Will some o' ye go 'long o' me to Little Timber? Mebbe your eyes'll be sharper fer sign than mine, to-day, fer somehow I feel a bit off my feed; reckon it's the ager ag'in."

"That we will—and woe be to those that have done this murder!" solemnly cried Thomas Howard.

For the time Black John's bold challenge was forgotten, and almost to a man the settlers hastened to prepare their horses for the ride to Little Timber. Among them were our friends, Kent Morgan, Curly, and Kershaw.

The half-dozen miles were quickly traversed, and the creek known as Little Timber, from the stunted trees and shrubbery that lined its banks, was reached. As the party rode up, two men glided out from the undergrowth, armed to the teeth. They were those left to keep guard over the dead.

Ike Goodheart dismounted and stood beside a little heap of fresh branches torn from the surrounding trees. With a strange gentleness he removed this covering, revealing the stiff, life-

less figure that had so recently been full of life and activity. For a moment he gazed fixedly upon the ghastly face of his dead, in silence. Then he spoke, in the same low, monotonous voice that had marked his tone since his appears-ance at the hotel.

"You see, gentlemen, whoever 'twas, made sure work o' it. Thar's whar the bullet struck—jest over the heart. I don't reckon he ever knowed what hurt 'im."

"Don't crowd around, boys, until we've had a look fer sign," said Curly Tostivan, peremptorily.

For full half an hour the vicinity was closely and systematically searched, but nothing was found that could throw any light upon the tragedy. Yet this was not so surprising to the party. A simple solution for that. The settler had been shot some time during the preceding day; even those least skilled in gunshot wounds could tell that much. And the heavy rain-storm, that had continued long after nightfall, had thoroughly obliterated all traces left by the murderers.

In turn the members of the party had examined the corpse, merely to satisfy that morbid curiosity one naturally feels upon such occasions. Kent Morgan was the last. He seemed not a little interested, closely scanning the body from head to foot, a peculiar light in his eyes.

Quickly slipping a hand beneath the body, he gently turned it over, and then, drawing a knife, slit the clothing between the shoulders. Several of the settlers pressed forward, murmuring, at their head was Ike Goodheart. Morgan returned their gaze frankly.

"I've found a bit of 'sign' that you all overlooked. The bullet that killed this man did not pass clear through his body. I can feel it now, just beneath the skin."

"Stan' aside, stranger," muttered Goodheart, "I must have the fust look at that bit o' lead."

With a hand firm and steady as steel, the borderer parted the clothing, and pressed his knife into the livid flesh. Then a bullet lay in the palm of his hand. With as much care as though this was some great treasure, Goodheart washed the telltale missile, and then eyed it keenly.

It was the pellet of a revolver, "navy sized." It bore the plain marks of the deeply-grooved barrel, but was not otherwise disfigured, and Goodheart's eyes glowed vividly as he saw that the bullet was "billeted"—that it bore the private mark of its owner; the initials M. C.

"Them thar's *my* letters, but you fellers all know how I mark my bullets," promptly cried one of the settlers.

"I know it wasn't you, Mat Craythone," as readily replied Goodheart. "But here, by the dead karkidge o' brother Tom, I sw'ar to find out whose work it is, and to hev his life, if it's fifty years from now!"

Kent Morgan examined the bullet, and then handed it back to Goodheart. Turning around, he noticed the eyes of Wayne Appleton searching his face. A faint smile curled his lips as Appleton turned away.

"What shall we do about— I mean how can we help you, Goodheart?" asked Howard.

"No way, jest now. The boys an' I'll attend to Tom. But I'll come over to the town this evenin'. Thar's this Black John affair, and I want somethin' to keep me from thinkin' too much o' him."

Ike Goodheart mounted his horse, and then the corpse of his brother was handed up to him. Balancing this across the saddle, he slowly rode away. As he disappeared, the settlers retraced their steps to Barrett's, conversing in low, eager tones.

Kent Morgan had but little to say, and appeared deep buried in thought. And the keen eyes of Wayne Appleton often wandered to that pale, handsome face, with an expression that could not easily be read.

An hour later Kent Morgan sat in his room at the hotel. Before him lay a bullet-mold and several bullets. Each one bore the initials M. C.; the same as that which had been extracted from the body of the dead man. And thus he sat thinking for a long time.

CHAPTER III.

THE DEFIANCE ACCEPTED.

"I DID not think I could be mistaken; at first sight I felt that I had seen him before, and that quite recently. The bullet explains it. This man was with Black John, yesterday. He is the one I shot down as he rode beside the coach. And yet—these men grieve over him as though he had been the most faithful and honorable of friends, instead of a masked renegade and outlaw."

"And the brother—this Ike Goodheart—does he know or suspect the truth? That there was love of no common strength between the two, no one could doubt, after a look at that man's face. At least there was no counterfeiting there. And he means every word of that oath—of his vow of vengeance. But does he *know*—or does he believe that his brother was murdered by the outlaws—by Black John? It don't seem possible that the two could live together, be brothers, and yet one belong to such an organization without the other being fully aware of the truth. And if he *does* know it, then Ike Goodheart knows who shot his brother—and he knows, too, why it was I sought for the marked bullet. He must know that I see through his story and know it to be false. But does he know why I held my peace and did not denounce the man all supposed to have been foully murdered, as a villain and an outlaw who had only met with a richly-deserved punishment? Perhaps he attributes my silence to fear—that his threats of vengeance frightened me. Well, let it be so, then. I must walk carefully, and keep my wits about me."

Sitting with gaze riveted upon the marked bullets, Kent Morgan mused long and thoughtfully. Occasionally a sentence fell audibly from his lips, but there were no ears near save his own to hear it. Had there been such, the settlement of Barrett's might have gained a more correct idea of who this traveler really was.

Morgan believed he could read aright the story of the past few hours—could unite the broken thread of the events that so perturbed Barrett's. He knew that this Thomas Goodheart was none other than the outlaw who had fallen at the same moment with his leader, Black John, attacking the stage-coach. The Road-Agents had removed their dead from the field. Their next move was to avert the discovery that threatened. Goodheart was a prominent stock-raiser, respected and looked up to in the settlement. Should it become known that he had fallen as one of Black John's masked riders, what would be the result? Suspicion would be aroused, and each man would become a spy upon his neighbor. And this might end in unpleasant discoveries! The mask might be torn from other faces. So, at least, Kent Morgan reasoned.

The body had been prepared and conveyed to the crossing on Little Timber. And then Ike Goodheart played his part in the drama. It had been a success in so far as the settlers were concerned. Not one among them suspected the truth.

"If he *was* playing a part, then I must watch my steps well. Though, for the sake of his dead brother's honor, he'll not dare accuse or attack me openly, he was in deadly earnest when he swore vengeance. He means to give these people another sensation, with my corpus in the title-role. Forewarned, fore-armed, they say, and we'll see which comes out first best," muttered Morgan, his blue eyes sparkling brightly, as he secured the mold and bullets, and then left the room.

He had just remembered that he had promised Mr. Howard to take dinner with him on that day, and it was full noon. The warm-hearted settler could not find words enough to express his thanks, for be sure the young ladies had not lessened the danger they had run, nor underrated the courage shown by the male passengers. And Howard had included Frank Kershaw and Wayne Appleton in the invitation.

Morgan already knew the house—a substantial stone building, standing upon the edge of a goodly-sized farm, that reached to the outskirts of the village. He found that dinner was in readiness, awaiting only his arrival. The stranger received a cordial greeting, and after being introduced to Mrs. Howard and the host's father, the table was occupied.

Morgan talked but little, being unusually silent for one of his naturally gay, careless spirits. More than once a puzzled expression rested upon his face, as he glanced across to where Wayne Appleton sat. He felt a vague remembrance of having met this man under other and very different circumstances; but he could go no further. Beyond, all was confused.

He noticed, too, that Appleton acted as though well acquainted with the two younger ladies, though it was evident that Mr. Howard had never met him before that day. Somehow, even while forced to admit to himself that Appleton was very handsome, witty, and a good conversationalist, Morgan began to feel a peculiar dislike for the stranger, and to watch him with suspicious doubt. Had any one hinted at this feeling being the offspring of jealousy, Kent

Morgan would have laughed heartily. Yet it was because Wayne Appleton wore such an air of deep devotion whenever he spoke to or listened to pretty May Howard, that this dislike was gaining ground, for, if not in love with, Kent was deeply interested by May, the black-eyed.

Frank Kershaw was in his glory. Mischievous little Eunice was drawing him out very skillfully, and in a manner that brought his peculiar foibles into full prominence. Such startling statements, such marvelous adventures, did he skim over, with the half-bored air of one to whom such things were quite a matter of course. And perhaps no one around the table believed these wonders more implicitly than Frank did. It is a settled fact among those who know him—and this character is a *live* one at the present day, though it is far beyond the power of my pen to draw him to the life—that Kershaw can "discount" Baron Munchausen at that worthy's own game, with a devout belief in his own fantastic creations.

After dinner, Morgan and Howard resumed the one subject of interest; what was to be done in regard to the challenge of Black John? Then the young folks left the room, almost unnoticed by them.

The afternoon was hazy and cool, a fresh breeze sweeping over the rolling prairie. Eunice had led Frank off to view the garden; then Appleton spoke to May, who was now unusually subdued, a slight shade resting upon her fair brow.

"Shall we walk as far as the maples yonder, Miss May? The shade will be pleasant, and there we can talk more freely than here."

"I have nothing to say that all may not hear—nor do I wish to listen to—"

"But you *must*—I mean that I must speak out plainly now, for the last time. You cannot refuse to hear me, though those words may not be pleasant to your ears," rapidly returned Appleton, drawing her hand through his arm.

Evidently ill at ease, after a brief hesitation, May yielded to his superior will, and they walked on to where a rustic seat stood beneath the sturdy maples. At a motion from Appleton, May sunk down upon the seat, but he stood before her, pale and serious, a bright light filling his eyes.

"You have not a word for me now—you sit there in silence as cold as though we were perfect strangers—as though the warm, passionate words of love had never passed between us. May—in God's name, tell why you have changed—what is this that has come between us?" he said, in a voice that trembled with ill-suppressed emotion.

"I should not think you would need ask me that, Mr. Appleton," coldly replied May Howard.

"I understand you," and his proud head drooped a little. "But I was innocent; I was first lured into drinking, and then betrayed by a man who had sworn he was my faithful friend. You hear my defense—it was published in the papers of the day, and all of them joined in laughing at and casting ridicule upon it. But surely you do not think I was lying?"

"Mr. Appleton, why bring up this matter again, when nearly a year had sunk it into oblivion? It can do no good—it can only end in disappointment for both of us. As I told you before, the past is dead and buried forever."

"It can—it must live again! Think how happy we were then, loving and beloved. I only lived while with you—I worshiped you—"

"Mr. Appleton, if this is all that you have to say to me, I will bid you good-day. I can listen no longer," coldly said May, arising to her feet.

"And yet the time was—not so many months since—when you told me that you loved me, when you fully reciprocated my vows—"

"You make me speak harsh words despite myself, Mr. Appleton. As you say, the time was—but it is not now. Then I believed you represented yourself—a man of honor, a gentleman in the truest sense of the word, and not a—"

"Why do you hesitate?—why not finish with the words upon your tongue? When I was not a convicted felon—before I was branded with the name of *thief-burglar*! The words are simple and easy spoken; then why hesitate?" bitterly said Wayne.

"You forced this upon me. I did not wish to say so much, but you pressed me for an answer, and I could only speak the truth," quietly replied May.

"Stay—do not leave me yet. If I have said aught to offend you, forgive me. My mad love for you has so changed me that I scarcely know myself. And then this last year has been a

very hard and trying one to me. I have suffered a thousand deaths in it, not for my bodily sufferings, though they treated me like a dog until I made my escape, but because I feared that you would learn to loathe and despise me, believing me guilty of all they said. But I swear to you now, by my hopes of a hereafter, that I was and am innocent!"

"For your own sake, I should be glad to believe this."

"You speak as though the matter had no interest to you—as though I were a perfect stranger!"

"I speak as I feel. You force me to speak plain words, though they must be disagreeable to you. And since so much has been said, the subject may as well be settled now, once and for all. You say that once I confessed that I loved you. I do not deny it. I was but a simple country girl, unused to society. You sought to win my love, as I firmly believe, merely as a kill-time. You were handsome, polite, a gentleman in manners and dress. Little wonder, then, that I believed you, and turned a deaf ear to those who would have warned me against trusting you. At that time I fancied that I loved you—perhaps I did, in a measure; but that does not matter now. You know the end. You were arrested, tried and convicted. True, you declare yourself the victim of a conspiracy. But other matters came out through the trial, enough to disenchant one far more deeply in love with you than I was. The scales fell from my eyes then, and I saw what a blind fool I had been. But thank God! the discovery did not come too late."

"But I was innocent—"

"Still, that can make no difference. All is over between you and I. Only that I desired to avoid a scene, I should have acted differently from what I have to-day. You have only yourself to thank for this reopening of an old wound."

It was a strange sight, that proud-looking man standing there with bowed head, his face ghastly pale, listening to such cutting words from the lips of the woman he so madly loved. And May, offended as she was, felt a thrill of pity as she looked upon him.

"You are very cruel—it is a fair face to cover such an unrelenting heart," Appleton said, bitterly, his eyes beginning to glitter, his pale cheeks to flush as the words stung home. "And once I believed that you could love! But then—I do not care to reproach you. Perhaps I deserve it all. Yet I never like to begin a thing without carrying it to an end. I came here to-day, intending to learn my fate, to ask you if you would make good your vow of last year. I ask you now: May Howard, will you be my wife?"

"And I answer you, *no*. That is my final answer, and unless you wish to insult me, you will not give me occasion to repeat it," coldly replied May.

"I shall not repeat the question again. Good-by."

May coldly bowed her head and swept past him, unnoticed the outstretched hand. Appleton stood motionless, watching her until she re-entered the house, then turned and strode rapidly away. As the grove shut the house from view, his assumed composure vanished, and he flung himself upon the ground in a paroxysm of rage and mortification, groveling in the damp grass like some wounded snake.

The sun had nearly disappeared behind the prairie waves, when Wayne Appleton returned to the hotel. But then his face bore no trace of the terrible struggle; he was the same cold, proud-mannered man of that morning. He entered the bar-room where a number of settlers had already collected, and joined in the debate. If he possessed no other talent Wayne Appleton was a good actor.

The settlers around and the inhabitants of Barrett's had collected, almost to a man. The main subject under discussion was the challenge of Black John. There seemed to be but one opinion regarding it: the bold insult must be avenged. A number were in favor of riding to the Twin Mounds, and thus deciding the matter by a pitched battle, but others were suspicious that the defiance covered a trap.

"We kin muster forty good men, all knowin' how to use the weapons they kerry," cried Abram Leigh. "Black John can't hev enough to give us much bother, 'less he's got the Injuns to help him, which ain't likely. Then, I say, let's go for 'em!"

"But he won't fight fair. It's more like he'll try a 'bushment 'long the road."

"Bushment be durned! Ain't thar more than

one trail 'crost the prairie? More like he did it jest for devilment, thinkin' we'd bluff."

"May he not have some design upon the village here? By drawing you away to the Twin Mounds, the coast would be clear for him to swoop down and work his will before we could get back," suggested Morgan.

"We kin leave enough fellows at home to sp'ile that game, an' still hev a plenty to bag him at the Mounds. I say—let's go. An' all those who don't want to be called durned goose-livered cowards, 'll j'ine me," hotly cried Leigh.

That speech settled the affair. Not one among them all would hold back after such words.

Then the question was more fully discussed, and a company of vigilantes regularly organized.

Some little difficulty was found in selecting a leader, for, in succession, Curly and Howard declined to serve. But then, Appleton, whose counsels had been acceptable to the majority, consented to serve as captain for the time.

The party then separated, returning to their homes to make preparations for the ride and anticipated struggle. With early dawn they were to take the trail.

CHAPTER IV.

OUTWITTED.

As the first faint streaks of gray began to brighten the eastern horizon, the sound of hoof-strokes filled the little village of Barrett's. The vigilantes were gathering for their ride to accept the challenge of Black John. There were pale and anxious faces among the women, though the tears that dimmed their eyes were not suffered to fall. They knew that a collision between the rival forces would be a stern and desperate one, in which more than one man might lose his life. And to them the face of the dead was ever that of him most dear to their hearts.

The only delay was that occasioned by the drawing lots to decide who were to remain as a guard at the village. Those whom fate selected were far from pleased. They did not relish the idea of being forced to remain at the village in inglorious idleness, while their comrades were enjoying themselves in the wild, intoxicating skirmish or hand-to-hand conflict. But, though muttering bitter curses upon their crooked luck, not one rebelled.

And from the village, through the narrow tract of sparsely-timbered land, the vigilantes entered upon the broad, rolling prairie. The party was composed of nearly two-score men, self-reliant and courageous, armed to the teeth with weapons that had been familiar to them since early boyhood. They were for the most part men "worth their weight in wildcats in a rough-and-tumble" or hand-to-hand fight; natural-born skirmishers, their tactics learned from the wild beasts and the no less crafty red-skin; men who won victory in their own way, not by blindly following any particular system of tactics.

The party were, for the most part, mounted upon that mongrel breed of animals, unsurpassed in any country for long and steady going beneath the saddle, the half-breed mustang—the "Indian pony." With the spirit that even a long day's travel cannot entirely subdue, the animals pranced and curveted at the unwonted restraint of a tightly-drawn rein, dashing the sparkling dew-drops from the bending blades of grass, scaring the rabbit, or occasionally its overgrown brother, the jackass-rabbit, from its form, flushing the quail and prairie-chicken from their grassy coverts. A non-a fleet-footed deer or antelope would dart out from some clump of shrubbery, disappearing over the prairie swell like some phantom of the gray dawn, unheeded, unnoticed by its usual enemy, save, perchance, by a passing glance. For the time being they may pass toll-free, for more exciting sport fills the minds of the prairie-riders.

In the midst of the party rode Frank Kershaw, far from being at ease. A "city man," Frank was scarcely up to these free-spirited, prairie-born horses. He had been furnished by Thomas Howard with a mount second to none in the band; but Frank failed to appreciate the kindness. The poor fellow was enduring the "tortures of the damned."

The pony would try to free its head, its mustang blood on fire with rivalry. Frank would tug convulsively at the reins until the cruel curb almost broke the animal's jaw, at the same time closing his bony legs close to the pony's side, when the sharp spur acted as a counter-irritant. A series of plunges was the result, in which, only for the high-horned Spanish saddle, Kershaw would scarce have escaped an ignominious tumble.

"Don't hold such a tight rein, stranger. Durn it all—you'll git the critter to buckin', and then you will be gone!" expostulated Curly.

"I—I don't think I'm well—I feel so queer," faintly muttered Kershaw. "If I only knew the road back, I believe I'd go home. I fear I'm going to be ill!"

"I don't reckon 'twould be any great loss if you was to go back," muttered Abram Leigh, disgustedly. "A goose-livered feller ain't o' much a'count whar we're goin'."

"Sir!" exclaimed Kershaw, "do you mean to insinuate that I am deficient in either moral or physical courage?"

"I don't mean to insinuate nothin', because I don't know what the jawbreaker stan's fer; but if it's anythin' onbecomin' a man, why you lit in sayin' of it."

"Well, since you apologize, we will let the matter drop. I'm not one to hold malice after amends are made," jerked forth Frank, clinging desperately to pommel and mane.

"Pologize nothin'! I said I didn't think you'd be o' much a'count in a scrimmage in this Black John outfit, an' I stick to it. I don't swar that you're a coward, but if a feller was to pay me to find him a raal coward, durn my cats if I wouldn't ax you to go with me to see him, anyhow."

"Peace, gentlemen," interposed Wayne Appleton, speaking in the authoritative tone of one not unaccustomed to obedience. "This is not the time for petty wrangling among ourselves. Save your breath; if this defiance of Black John is genuine, it is very likely that you both will have your fill of fighting before the matter is ended."

"All right, Cap; you're boss here just now, an' I'll walk the chalk. But this much I do say—an' them as knows me 'll tell whether I ever go back on my word—of the stranger plays his part like a man when the pinch comes, I'll ax his pardon, an' own up 'at I was wrong in my guess. But ef he don't—ef he shows the white feather—ef he turns tail an' tries to crawfish out o' the mess, send me to everlastin' glory, ef I don't bore a hole through him big a-plenty to kick a yearlin' colt through."

Perhaps 'twas as well that Frank Kershaw was so fully occupied with his native charger that he could not reply to this threat with the retort he would otherwise have offered, for Abraham Leigh was one of those hotblooded, reckless, unreasoning animals that are seldom found but upon the verge of civilization. A man that his friends fear fully as much, if not more, than his enemies, because they know not at what moment, nor with what pretext, he may turn upon them, for the moment a fiend incarnate. A man who is "sp'ilin' for a scrimmage," caring little whether his antagonist be friend or foe, so long as his pugilistic propensities be gratified.

"Best steer clear o' that chap, youngster," muttered Curly, warningly, as he rode close beside Kershaw. "He's on it, bigger'n a wolf, he is. Thar ain't anybody in the State that keers to cross him, when the fit is on. I know you ain't afeard, because I believe you'd nat'rally eat him up ef once started, but you wouldn't like to leave his wife an' fambly pore lone wid-ders, would ye?"

"For their sake I'll overlook his words, Mr. Curly, provided he don't say any more," magnanimously replied Frank. "I don't suppose he knows who I am."

The sun gradually mounted the horizon, its warm rays evaporating the heavy dew. A fresh, cool breeze swept across the prairie, bowing the grass-tips before its breath in waves that seemed fleeing and pursuing, here and there, in fantastic curves and angles, or else long, regular columns. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but a sea of living green, the gentle prairie swells closely resembling the long, majestic rolling of the ocean. Not a tree or a bud was to be seen. Nothing but the waist-high grass, dotted here and there with the brilliant crest of some gaudy flower.

The vigilantes rode steadily onward through the sea of grass, following no trail, but heading direct for the Twin Mounds. If Black John had calculated upon drawing the settlers into an ambush along the regular trail, as had been suggested, he would be disappointed in the hope.

More than one of the party chafed angrily at the deliberate movements of their leader, who, however, took no notice of them, until their dissatisfaction found vent in open speech. Then he drew rein, and, with a gesture, commanded attention.

"Gentlemen," he said, and there was a peculiar firmness underlying the soft, musical tone,

that each man felt, "I hear you grumbling and complaining among yourselves. What is the matter—what is going wrong?"

"I reckon they think Black John'll git tired o' waitin' fer us," promptly replied Leigh. "An' it do look like we was goin' to a funeral, rather than a scrimmage."

"You are impatient to meet this bully, and avenge the insult he offered you all, and I am glad that it is so. Though I am a stranger to the majority of you, I can sympathize with your feelings. But to be prudent is not to be cowardly. If you think for a moment, you will see that I am taking the wisest course. In the first place you say the Twin Mounds are thirty odd miles from the village. By hard riding, we could possibly do the distance in two hours and a half, but then what condition would our animals be in when the Mounds were reached? Totally used up, unfit for duty without a night's rest. And if I am not mistaken in this man, Black John, as he is called, we will need all the advantage we may have, before the affair is settled. Is it likely that he would send such a defiance unless he felt able to make the boast good? True, it may be only a trick to give us the ride for nothing. But in that case, we will wish to return home rather than camp out for the night. And if he is there, better meet him with fresh horses, that one can depend upon, rather than broken down plugs."

"At the rate we have been traveling, we can make the Mounds by noon, or perhaps an hour later. His challenge stated that he would await our coming until sunset. That will give us plenty of time."

"This is my reasoning, and the plan which must be followed while I am acting as captain. But, if it fails to satisfy you all, I will resign the position in favor of any other whom you prefer as leader. I can see the fun as well, whether I be captain or private."

This terse, pointed speech was well received by the settlers. They saw the soundness of his reasoning and the folly of their grumbling. As one man, they promised blind obedience to Appleton, declaring that he and no other should lead them, and even Kent Morgan, who was unaccountably prejudiced against the stranger, could not but admire his clear foresight. He seemed a born leader among such men as these.

A short time after this interruption there came another that for the time bade fair to end fatally. For several miles Frank Kershaw had been progressing tolerably quietly, his horse having fretted some of his extra spirits away. Curly was riding beside Frank, pouring wonderful information into the greenhorn's ear, all the while maintaining the gravity of a statue. At an unusually brilliant word-painting of the splendor of a gold-placer that Curly possessed upon his farm, Frank's long pent up spirits found vent in a loud hurrah! and unconsciously he plunged both spurs rowel deep into the flanks of his horse. Snorting with pain, the animal plunged forward. Naturally Kershaw jerked upon the reins, forgetting the cruel curb bit. His mouth torn, the tortured beast reared up, whirling half round, and plunged madly forward.

One hoof struck Curly full in the side, the other alighting with crushing force upon the borderer's horse's head. Both horses and riders came to the ground together in a confused, struggling heap.

For a minute all was confusion. Then the settlers managed to extricate the fallen men, and raise the horses to their feet. Frank was uninjured save by a few trifling bruises, but Curly had fared worse. Reeling, he sunk to the ground, half insensible. The blow he had received was a severe one, and the horse had fallen across his legs.

A hasty examination, however, showed that no bones were broken, and after a taste of corn-whisky, Curly declared he was all right again. It was found then that his horse was unable to travel; besides the gash upon his head, one leg had been broken by the fall.

Still Curly declared that he would not be cheated out of the anticipated scrimmage, and mounted behind Abram Leigh. A pistol-shot put the crippled animal out of its misery, and then the party swept on at an increased pace, to make amends for lost time.

But, as the numbness gradually grew less, Curly began to suffer excruciatingly, until at last he was forced to cry out. It seemed as though he had been injured internally, and the motion of the animal was more than he could bear.

"You'll hev to leave me here, boys," he said, faintly, though reluctantly. "I can't stan-

the ridin', but mebbe I kin do better afoot. I'll try an' git to the Mounds, in time to take a hand in. I'd rather lost a hand then to miss it—durn the crooked luck!"

There was nothing else to be done, and so the party swept on, leaving the tall borderer gazing after them with eyes almost filled with tears of disappointment, his chest heaving convulsively. Yet, perhaps, had he known what was to be the ultimate result of that accident, he would have been content. Only for that fact, much that follows would never have been written.

It was full noon before the base of the nearest of the Twin Mounds could be distinguished, though for an hour past, their summits had been visible. There was nothing remarkable in their formation, but they had become a noted landmark from their being the only high ground for miles around. They were probably three hundred feet above the level of the prairie, standing side by side, of precisely the same size and shape. Their crests were covered with broken rocks and boulders, but the sides were clothed in waist-deep grass. Not a tree, bush or shrub broke the green surface.

"Thar goes a smoke!" cried Abram Leigh, as a slender column of dense black vapor steadily ascended from the top of the nearest mound. "The varmints is thar, waitin' fer us—an' here goes fer the fust lick at 'em!"

"Halt!" rung the clear voice of Wayne Appleton, as his white hand caught the borderer's bridle, jerking the horse back upon its haunches. "Do you want to spoil all by your mad haste? Wait until I give the word."

"Now, my friends," he added, speaking rapidly, "you can see that I was right in my first plan. We are at the rendezvous, and our animals are fresh, and ready, if needs be, for a tail-on-end chase. Then surely you can trust me for the rest?"

"You bet we kin! Go on—we'll do jist as you say," was the general cry.

"Good! I shall not betray your trust, believe me. But now listen. Yonder are the Mounds, and that column of smoke tells that our game is close at hand. As you see, they have fair cover among the rocks, and, doubtless, upon this fact they rest their hopes of success. They depend upon picking us off as we charge the mound. And so they would were we to charge mounted, as friend Leigh here was about to do. But look yonder. The grass upon that side-hill is full three feet high. By close creeping, we can get to within twenty yards of their position; and then, by a vigorous rush, they're our meat. You understand me? Do any of you object to this plan?"

"Where will we leave the animals?" asked Howard.

"On this side of the ravine, yonder. 'Twould be hard work crossing with them, anyhow."

There was not a voice raised in objection. Appleton had acquired a wonderful influence over the rough, hardy settlers, and if his reasoning was unsound, they did not notice it.

Even while he was speaking, the base of the smoke-column broke and left the crest of the mound clear, the mass of black vapor floating further and further away, growing more and more dim, until lost among the light, fleecy clouds that flecked the heavens. Not a sign of human life could be detected upon the Twin Mounds. Only for the smoke-signals, the vigilantes might have believed their ride had been a wild-goose-chase. But that plainly evidenced the presence of human beings upon the mound; and who else could it be but the senders of the insolent defiance? The prairies were not so densely peopled as that.

Riding up to the edge of the ravine, the vigilantes dismounted and tethered their animals to the fringe of stunted bushes that grew along the escarpment. Then, led by Wayne Appleton, they crossed the gully, and gilded rapidly on toward the Twin Mounds. Their attention was mainly directed toward the nearest elevation; the one from whose summit had arisen the smoke-column.

"Look! yonder is a man's head and shoulders!" cried Thomas Howard, when within several hundred yards of the mound's base.

"The challenge appears to have been made in good faith, after all, though I must confess that I doubted it," quietly remarked Appleton.

"Shall we begin firing now?" asked Kershaw, nervously.

"Don't be a fool, man—we don't carry cannon with us. But one word more, my lads. Yonder is the enemy, and if we work it right, his strong position will be no great advantage. By close creeping, this grass will cover us until near enough to run in upon them. After that, you

know what to do. So scatter out and drop down in the grass. Then creep on as close as you can, undiscovered. When you hear my cry, dart in, and when you strike, remember the insults this Black John and his band of cut-throats have heaped upon you," hurriedly said Appleton.

The vigilantes sunk down into the grass, disappearing like phantoms. No sound betrayed their progress—nothing but a slight swaying, bending of the prairie-grass; and even that seemed the work of the wind. Many a time and oft had the settlers, in a like manner, stalked the wary deer and timid antelope; but now a higher game filled their eyes.

With the others, Frank Kershaw sunk down and began crawling along; but not for far. Of course he was not afraid; Frank would have challenged to mortal combat any one who dared hint at such a thing. But he was tired. The long ride had exhausted him. This recollection assailed him in full force as he came across a small hollow in the prairie, and Kershaw curled himself up in the hole, feeling much better than he did when steadily nearing the chosen fastness of Black John. And there he awaited the issue.

Abram Leigh was one of the foremost of the stalkers, burning with eagerness, impatiently listening for the signal of assault, even while advancing further up the mound. With characteristic recklessness, he crept close enough to peer into the irregular pile of rocks and boulders that thickly covered the hill-crest. Suddenly his eyes lit up with an eager glow, and he raised the muzzle of his rifle. Scarcely ten yards from his position he beheld a battered felt hat, just above a long boulder.

As the silver drop covered this, he fired, then leaping to his feet with a wild yell, darted forward with drawn revolver. Answering yells came from the hillside, but none others. In amazement, Abram Leigh stood still, while his comrades rushed forward, eager to meet the foe.

But the mound was deserted by all save the vigilantes. Leigh had fired at an old hat upon a rock.

Yet the ashes of the fire that had sent up the smoke-column were still smoldering upon the rock, and other unmistakable evidences of the mound having been lately occupied lay upon every side.

"Look yonder!" cried Kent Morgan, pointing toward the second mound, a distance of nearly quarter of a mile separating the two summits, as the crow flies.

There, among the gray rocks, could be distinguished a number of human figures. But why had one mound been abandoned for the other, when both were equally secure?

"Boys, they're fooled us!" cried Appleton, pointing along the back trail, as a faint yell broke the air.

CHAPTER V.

RACING AGAINST TIME.

A LONG, exultant yell came up from the prairie—a yell that confirmed the emphatic words of Wayne Appleton. And, with that one exception the settlers stood in speechless amazement, while their cunning foemen were reaping the reward of their strategy.

Above the tops of the stunted bushes that fringed the further edge of the prairie ravine or barranca, could be distinguished the horses of the settlers as they had been left. But as Appleton uttered the cry that terminates the last chapter, a change came. Fully a dozen human forms leap out into the open, from the ravine. The horses snort and leap back, but are quickly checked by their tethers. And, as the exultant yell soars over the prairie to the ears of the men upon the mound, each of the human figures leap into a saddle. Then, after a brief confusion, they turn and ride rapidly away from the ravine, leading with them extra animals. The vigilantes saw this, and were powerless to prevent it. And, adding insult to injury, once more the loud yell and taunting laughter came floating to their ears as the enemy rode away upon the stolen horses.

"A cute trick, an' played ekil to a Chayenne or a 'Rapahoe!" muttered Abram Leigh, twisting off a "chaw."

"But why are we standing idle here, while they are every moment increasing their advantage?" said Kent Morgan.

"What kin we do, stranger?" coolly retorted Leigh. "Kin we outrun a hoss-critter when it's got a good quarter the start? I reckon not. Then whar's the use o' tryin'?"

"A glorious day's work! To set out after

Road-Agents, and have to return home dismounted!"

"Expecting to shear, but being shorn—'tis cursedly provoking. But we may fare better, after all. See—yonder mound is still occupied. If we do lose our animals, perhaps we may yet accomplish our main object," said Wayne.

"Or make a clean job of it by getting whipped instead of whipping—for these fellows yonder are fully our force, if not superior in numbers."

"Let them be ten to one if they will—we are not cowards. Those that fear the result had better wait here until we clear the path for them," said Appleton, with a disagreeable sneer.

"If you mean that for me, I can follow wherever you dare lead," retorted Morgan.

"Durn your long-winded clickety-clack anyhow—your wusser'n so many women!" disgustingly cried Leigh. "Follow me, boys—here goes for the first skelp on yonder hill!" and as he spoke the hot-headed settler leaped far down the hillside, breaking into a pace that would almost have distanced an antelope or coyote.

The example was contagious. One after another the vigilantes sprung forward, each striving to distance all others, and be the first upon the second mound. Forgetting their momentary spat, Appleton and Morgan were with the foremost.

The people upon the second hill were grouped together, seemingly ready to repel the assault. They plainly bore weapons, and were fully equal, if not superior to the settlers in numbers. This, added to their vantage of position, made the mad assault appear folly.

The base of the hill was reached, but the settlers did not pause for breath. They were thoroughly aroused, and their blood ran high with rivalry. Nor did those upon the summit open fire, though their weapons were surely equal to the distance; but one of their number suddenly leaped forward with a loud, clear cry, waving above his head a whitely-tanned skin!

As if by the same impulse, the vigilantes paused, their gaze riveted upon this man. A look of doubt gradually overspread their countenances. Could it be that they had made a mistake after all?

"That is Shika-chetish!" exclaimed Howard, blankly.

"Bad-Wolf, by the jumpin' Jupeteer!" interpreted Abram Leigh, lowering his rifle.

The rest of the party stood in speechless amazement at this transformation of their hated enemy into a parcel of peaceful Indians. They scarce knew whether to rejoice or be angry. They were puzzled most thoroughly.

"What has the Kickapoos done that their white brothers hunt them like dogs?" demanded Shika-chetish, lowering the flag of truce, speaking in his own tongue, knowing that several of the settlers understood the *patois*.

"We are looking for enemies, chief, and thought we had found them here. Were you upon the other mound, yonder, a short time ago?" promptly returned Wayne Appleton.

"Yes. The mounds are not the corn-fields of the pale-faces. They are not fenced in like a corral. They are free to the foot of the Kickapoo—or is that a crime, too?"

"Easy, chief; don't get your back up for nothing," coolly said Appleton. "It will save time if you answer such questions as we ask you, in as few words as possible. And for your own sake, I trust your answers will be satisfactory."

The Kickapoo turned and glanced rapidly over his band, and then contrasted it with that of the force of the settlers. A grim smile briefly curled his lip; but then his face resumed its wonted expression of stolidity.

Bad-Wolf is a character that many still living in Kansas will recognize. In more than one way he made his mark. Cruel, crafty, and treacherous, he was undeniably a brave man. At one time he had been a noted chief of his tribe, but when jealousy and partisan spirit broke the tribe into different clans, Bad-Wolf found himself the leader of not more than a hundred braves. But they were the flower of the tribe, devoted to him, body and soul. Led by their idolized chief, they would have hurled themselves upon certain death. And now they stood with ready weapons, their eyes watching every movement of Bad-Wolf, ready to obey his slightest gesture. Both parties stood above a volcano; a single spark might cause their destruction.

"Speak on; the ears of the chief are open," he briefly said.

"You were on that mound and saw us coming; why did you send up the smoke signal?" asked Appleton.

"The sun was in our eyes; we thought you were enemies. The coyotes with the black and white faces have uncovered the tomahawk and stuck the war-pole. They say that the Kickapoo braves are in their way, and that they will sweep them from off the prairies. We thought that they were coming to make their threats good."

"But the smoke?"

"Look!" and Shika-chetish flung out one hand, pointing to the west.

Afar off over the prairie swells could be distinguished a compact body of horsemen, rapidly galloping down upon the Twin Mounds. For a moment the settlers were startled, believing that Black John and his band were approaching in answer to the Kickapoo signal, and if they were allies, there could be but one result. The chief seemed to read the doubt written upon their faces, and quickly added:

"They are my braves. They have been seeking the double-faced men. But my brothers need not fear; the Kickapoos are their friends."

"Fears! an' of a red-skin? A leetle more sech talk, an' you'll git hurt, old man—you hear me?" cried Abram Leigh, contemptuously.

"This is an idle waste of time—and that may be precious now. Ask him what connection he has with those men who stole our horses," impatiently cried Kent.

Appleton repeated the question, but the chief did not appear to comprehend him. A puzzled expression rested upon his crafty features, and not until the vigilante chief reiterated his words, did Bad-Wolf make any answer.

He declared that he knew nothing whatever of the matter; that he had retreated from the mound, between him and the suspected enemy, hoping thus to gain time during which the rest of his braves might come up in answer to the smoke signal. Until that moment he had known nothing whatever of the horses being stolen.

"Mebbe thet's the truth, but durned 'f I don't believe you are lyin'," candidly uttered Leigh.

The chief scowled angrily, and one hand dropped to the knife-hilt at his girdle. With one accord his braves flung forward their rifle-muzzles, with fingers upon the triggers. Quick as thought the settlers imitated the movement. A desperate, deadly collision seemed inevitable, but Wayne Appleton leaped forward and in a loud tone commanded peace. After a moment's hesitation, Shika-chetish motioned the braves back, and then, with uplifted hand, made a peculiar gesture. The mounted savages upon the prairie below abruptly drew rein and remained motionless, quarter of a mile distant.

"Does that look as though Shika-chetish was an enemy?" he uttered, in a quiet, cold tone.

"No—my young man did you wrong; but he did not mean what he said. We know that the Kickapoos are our friends. But listen: will you lend or sell us new horses?"

"No. We have taken the war-path against the double-faced men. Until their scalps drag in the dust, there is no trading or hunting in our hearts," coldly said the chief.

"We can't force him to do it, friends. I don't see but that we'll have to foot it back to the village."

"And the sooner we do that, the better. I fear there is more in this matter than we see upon the surface. I believe we have been outwitted from first to last—that Black John sent that challenge just to draw us away from home," cried Howard, uneasily.

"But for what—what object could he have?"

"God knows! I only feel that there is mischief brewing—that our dear ones at home are in peril. I can't drive the thought away—it has been haunting me since this morning when we first started."

The words of the settler found an echo in the heart of almost every man present, and a vague, undefined fear sprung up in every heart as they thought of their loved ones left almost defenseless in their homes. Thus it needed but the cry of Howard to set them in motion.

"Come—back to the village! There's deviltry going on there—I know it—I feel it in my heart!"

As he spoke he darted down the hill-side, closely followed by the vigilantes. As though taken by surprise, Wayne Appleton remained behind for a moment, speaking earnestly with Shika-chetish. But then he darted swiftly after the excited settlers.

As he darted past the other mound, the form of a man sprung up before him, rubbing his eyes violently. It was Frank Kershaw, who started from his grassy nest as the settlers swept by.

"Where 've you been?" gritted Appleton, fiercely, with a suspicious glance around.

"I—I fell asleep as we were crawling through the grass. You see, I couldn't sleep last night—had the nightmare, I believe. But the— Are they killed? The Road-Agents, I mean."

"No; they are after us now. Unless you wish to be scalped alive, young man, you'll keep up with us. It's only a bit of a run—some thirty miles—and we'll be safe when the village is reached. But remember, keep up with us, or your life isn't worth a copper," grimly said Appleton, increasing his pace, scrambling through the *barranca* with the skill and celerity of a mountain goat.

"Don't—don't go so—fast, please," gasped Kershaw. "Not that I'm afraid—don't think that—but I wouldn't like to—deprive you all of a share in the—glory of exterminating these devils!"

Appleton laughed shortly, and running with chest squared and head erect, forged ahead of the young man, who in vain strove to emulate his speed. And thus, strung out as the swiftest-footed gained upon the other, the settlers raced over the prairie, a sickening dread gradually gaining ground in their hearts. It was a race such as none among them had ever entered into before; thirty miles of rolling prairie to be crossed, where there was no trail, where the stiff grass grew nearly waist high, twisting about their feet, more than once causing an awkward fall; but then another would take up the running, thus partially breaking the way for those who followed. It was a terrible, killing race; but the settlers thought not of themselves, scarce felt the fatigue that caused them to reel and stagger like drunken men. Steadily the panic had gained upon them, until, as the village was neared, each man believed that the race would end beside the lifeless bodies of all that he held most dear upon this earth.

As the ridge was gained from which the first glimpse could be caught of Barrett's, a gasping cry of joyful relief broke from the lips of the foremost men. The village still stood seemingly peaceful and undisturbed. In that moment the reaction came, and for the first time since leaving the Twin Mounds, the vigilantes dropped into a walk.

They saw the village spring into a sudden life, and in the red rays of the descending sun they could distinguish men, women and children flocking toward the point from which they approached.

"I reckon this hes bin a durned fool day's work, from eend to eend," growled Abram Leigh, hoarsely. "We went out on four legs, an' come back 'th only two!"

From out the group beside the village, a single horseman rode swiftly toward the returning vigilantes. As he drew rein before them, they read black news in his face, even before he spoke.

"Boys, thar's bin the devil to pay here! Black John an' his cut-throat gang hes bin here, an' kerried off with them Howard's gals— Thar! look to him!" he added, as Thomas Howard started back with a faint cry, reeling, falling to the ground.

The blow had been too much for him in his greatly exhausted state. It had felled him as though with a death-stroke. Kent Morgan and others bent over him, trying to restore his consciousness, while the rest formed around the rider with eager questions.

"I don't rightly understand it myself," he added, with a puzzled air. "We was led off on a wild-goose chase by that devil, Ike Goodheart, an' when we got off the harm was did. May an' Eunice was gone, an' old man Howard was dead—murdered by them ar' very devils. I'm dubious the old lady, too, has got her death-blow. They say she goes from one fit into another, like a mad body. It's a black, black day, this!"

"But what're we standin' here like durned gumpheads for? Ar' we goin' to let them cusses bluff us this a-way? Somebody say what to do, for ge-minently sake!" spluttered Abram Leigh, almost beside himself.

"The boys tack the trail an' follered it to Little Timber, but thar it was lost in the water. They sent me back to see ef you fellers hed got back yit."

"Come—if you are men, follow me!" gasped Howard, staggering to his feet. "Help me rescue my children from that devil—oh, God! why am I so helpless when I need all my strength!"

"Lean on us—we will take you to your house, and then we will do all that men can to find your children and restore them to you. This shall be Black John's last day of evil—we will

never rest until both he and his cowardly gang are dead and food for the buzzards!" cried Kent Morgan, hotly, but determinedly.

Helpless as a child, the stricken man was assisted to his now desolate home—the house of mourning and of death. Once there, he sunk into a deathlike stupor, from which it seemed that nothing could awaken him. And hour after hour the kindly neighbors watched beside the two couches, that bade fair to be death-beds before the rising of another sun.

The village was left almost wholly to the women and children that night. The vigilantes, worn and jaded as they were with their long race, mounted fresh horses and scoured the prairie for miles around, in the hope of overtaking the kidnappers, or coming upon some trace of their whereabouts. But the first rays of the morning sun shone upon them, unsuccessful.

By this time they had nearly all learned the facts of the case; a tale of black treachery in one whom, until then, they had all respected and trusted.

Riding in hot haste, the Goodheart had returned to the village about the hour of noon, bearing black tidings. He said the vigilantes had been drawn into an ambush, composed of Indians and Road-Agents, led by Black John. Outnumbered, they had ensconced themselves—those who had survived the first volley—dispatching him for assistance. Every man and boy capable of bearing arms had mounted and followed his lead to the rescue. In the confusion of the mad gallop, Goodheart had given them the slip, but not until they were miles from home.

Scarcely had they left when a band of masked horsemen dashed into Barrett's, and riding direct for the house of Thomas Howard, entered and carried away both May and Eunice, leaving old Mr. Howard dead upon the floor, stricken down as he strove to defend his idolized grandchild with the feeble strength old age had left him.

This was the blow that Black John's challenge had masked.

CHAPTER VI.

BORDER VENGEANCE.

CURLY TOSTIVAN muttered more than one bitter curse against the greenhorn whose carelessness had disabled him, as he saw the vigilantes ride rapidly away to keep the rendezvous, and knew that he was not to participate in the wild, exciting scrimmage that would follow the meeting of the rival forces. And to one of his reckless, dare-devil nature, this was a very great deprivation, since, now that the country was so rapidly becoming "civilized," similar opportunities were few and far between.

"I'll try it, anyhow," he muttered, tight clenching his teeth, as a spasm of pain shot through his side. "I kin take a nigher cut than they kin, fer the kenions. Mebbe I'll be in time to see the fun—ef I don't, 'twon't be my fault, anyhow."

With indomitable pluck, the borderer pressed on, at times gasping for breath that seemed almost like molten iron when it came. At times he was forced to halt and either support himself upon his rifle, or else sink down upon the grass, the pain at his breast being so great and hard to bear. Yet as often would he start to his feet and press on, cursing the accident that so delayed him.

With dogged perseverance Curly pressed on, though well knowing now that if the Road-Agents were really at the Twin Mounds, the affair would be decided long before he could gain the spot. But, as he muttered to himself, the boys should see that it was from no lack of will that he failed to be with them in the scrimmage.

It was during one of his fainting-spells that the dismounted vigilantes passed by in their mad race for home. Though they were in sight not more than a minute, and full two miles to the right, had Curly been standing up, he must have seen them, and would have known that the affair of the Mounds was over. But he lay there buried in the yielding grass, panting, gasping for breath, a blood-flecked froth tinging his lips. So strangely does Providence shape our actions. This was the second link, Kershaw's careless riding being the first, the end was to be a tragedy.

Half an hour later Curly paused in his painful tramp, and shading his eyes, peered eagerly forward. Just rising the next ridge he could distinguish the head and shoulders of a man, evidently in hot haste. If his present course was maintained, the two must soon meet.

"Who is it?" He's in a hurry—bareheaded,

too! Kin it be that the boys have been whipped out?" muttered Curly, uneasily, as he watched the man. "Looks like somebody was chasin' him— Ge-thunder! it's that durned greenhorn as crippled me up, skeered 'most to death! The pesky coward has got skeered at his own shadder, I reckon."

Even in his pain, Curly could not resist the impulse to give Frank a scare, and, dropping down in the grass, he crept along to intercept the fugitive, who was running heavily and unsteadily, as though nearly exhausted. When about fifty feet separated them, Curly rose erect, with leveled rifle, crying out, in menacing tones:

"Halt! thar—gi' me your brains, or I'll blow your money out!"

Kershaw instantly paused, with a cry of terror; but as he saw the leveled rifle, he turned and sought to flee. The rifle spoke, and, stumbling, Frank fell, uttering a shriek as though mortally wounded. Chuckling grimly, Curly Tostivan approached him, reloading his rifle.

"What in thunder you lyin' down thar in the grass fer?" he gruffly demanded, as he gained the side of the prostrate figure, touching Kershaw with his foot, by no means gently.

Frank slightly turned his head, stealing a quick glance at the speaker from his nearly-closed eyes. A snort of relief told that he recognized Curly. Then he sprang to his feet, laughing loudly, though the voice was not remarkably steady.

"Ha! ha! I knew it was you, all the time. Didn't I fool you nice? Good joke, ain't it, Mr. Curly?"

"It'll do for once in a way, I reckon. I thought you drapped as though you wasn't bad skeered. But, say—where's the rest o' the fellers?"

"What, don't you know—haven't you heard?"

"I don't know nothin'—you took pesky good keer that I shouldn't, with your durned nice ridin'. But what d' y' mean by drawin' that long face? Durn it, man, can't ye speak out?" testily cried Tostivan.

"They're dead—rubbed out—puckacheed—gone to glory—departed this life from an overdose of Black John," solemnly replied Kershaw.

"Look here, boy—'nough's enough, but too much is a plenty. I don't blame ye fer actin' the fool, beca'se I b'lieve it's only a'cordin' to natur'. But when I ax a straight question, I want a straight answer, an', to save trouble, I reckon you'd better give me one. Now whar is the boys?" quietly repeated Curly, his eyes gleaming ominously.

"Listen; I will a tale unfold—"

"Unfold your tail here, an' it comes off, smack an' smooth right ahind your ears. Mind what I tell ye."

"You have no poetry in your composition," disgustedly muttered Kershaw; then, catching a glimpse of the devil glittering in Tostivan's eye, he hastily added: "I'll tell you all about it. We reached the Twin Mounds and found the enemy there—about two hundred strong, I should guess. That is," as the borderer made a gesture of impatience, "there may have been one or two less than that, for, of course, I didn't have time to count them. I gave the order to charge them, and the boys nobly seconded my efforts. Up the first hill we rushed, they firing all the time, rolling some of us over at every step, and closed with them hand-to-hand. Only for a moment, however, for they fled in dismay. As soon as we could gain breath, we followed them to the second mound. There we had it hot and heavy. We slaughtered the villains like a turkey-gobbler slaying grasshoppers. Blood ran down the hillside in streams, until, upon my veracity! the mound was an island! Yes, sir! from that judge the prodigies of valor we performed. I never led a braver squad in my life—not even at the forlorn hope of—that is, you understand me," Kershaw added, slightly confused at the peculiar grunt of Tostivan.

"Durned 'f I do, nuther. Which whipped?"

"There it is! what can the bravest of men do, when outnumbered twenty to one? The villains were reinforced by about three hundred men—and we retreated, in good order, though. But we found that the Road-Agents had outflanked us and captured our animals. They tried to stop us, but we cut through them, strewing the plain with dead and dying wretches. They followed us, and we separated for safety. From this point I can only tell you of my experience, from that you can judge the fate of the rest. Six horsemen followed me. For two miles I raced with them, holding my own with the foremost, while the five others were strung out in a line. Then I wheeled and waited for him

to come up. With this revolver—at which you were pleased to jest, yesterday—I shot him through the brain. At the same moment his horse stumbled and fell, breaking his neck. I had meant to secure him, as I was tired going afoot. But why dilate? You see—there is only one charge remaining in this weapon. I fired six shots—and I do not often miss my aim. Yet, by a remarkable coincidence, every one of the six horses stumbled and fell as I shot their riders, every one breaking their necks. That accounts for my still being afoot."

"Boy, I reckon you was a lawyer when you was at home, jedgin' from the glib way you kin lie. Thar—you needn't deny it. I kin tell your story a heap straighter'n you ken, though it mayn't sound quite as highfalutin'. You got skeered afore the Twin Mounds was reached, an' turned tail an' run away. That's my pinion, fer I know you to be the outlyinest coward that ever sot up to be a man. You needn't snort an' grit your teeth an' look so fierce, like a sheep. Fer hafe a cent I'd down ye across my knee, an' spank ye ontill yer nose bled—an' durned ef I don't do it, too, the next lie you tell me. So mind that!"

Frank wilted. He saw that Tostivan meant just what he said, and was a man who knew how to make his words good. Curly stood in deep thought for a few moments. Of course he knew that Kershaw was lying, but he knew that he could not reach the Mounds in his present condition much before midnight. Knowing this, he resolved to make the best of his way back to the village. Telling Frank as much, he added:

"You kin come, ef you like, but I'd 'vise ye not. The boys ain't partial to liars an' cowards, an' mebbe 'll take a notion to give you an overcoat o' tar an' feathers, unless they string ye up to the nearest tree, to save time."

"If they dare do that, the President shall hear of it. He's a particular friend—that is—I'll go with you," he stammered, as Curly uttered a deep growl of warning.

Together the two started for the village, but their progress was slow. Often Curly would sink to the ground, gasping for breath, ejecting blood from his mouth. But then he would rise and stagger on, though every step was with a spasm of pain. And thus it was nearly midnight when the two men suddenly paused with a startled air.

A hollow groan came faintly to their ears. A groan like that of a human being in intense agony, yet nearly exhausted. Yet nothing but the tall, waving grass could be distinguished by the clear light of the twinkling stars.

"It sounded from that direction—le's creep around it this way," faltered Kershaw, his teeth chattering like castanets.

"You're afeard—after that wonderful yarn you told, braggin' up your awful courage?" sneered Curly, contemptuously.

"I ain't afraid—but it might be a ghost!"

"I shouldn't wonder ef 'twas—the ghost o' them fellers you shot off thar stumblin' hosses, boy. But, ghost or not, here goes to larn the truth. An' you, greeny—ef you try to run afore I tell ye you may, I'll bore a hole through that gourd o' your'n, sure!"

Sinking down into the grass, Tostivan crept cautiously through the tangled growth toward the point from whence the groaning sound still proceeded. At first he had vague suspicions of some trick, but as he neared the spot, he knew that the groans were genuine—that this was no counterfeit anguish.

The groans ceased, and at almost the same moment the borderer beheld a human head lifted above the grass, pale, ghastly, pain-distorted. A cry of wondering surprise broke from Curly's lips as he leaped to his feet. He had recognized this human head—it was that of Ike Goodheart.

At the same moment a blinding glare filled his vision, and a stinging pain shot through his face. The report of a revolver rung sharply upon the night air.

"Not yet—you shain't take me alive—the rope ain't twisted thet'll hang me!" hoarsely cried Goodheart, as the hammer was raised and the cylinder revolved with a clear, metallic click.

"Hold! man—be ye crazy?" cried Tostivan, leaping forward and clutching the loaded weapon. "Don't ye know better'n to blaze away at a fri'nd who's ready an' willin' to help ye?"

"You—you're not a fri'nd," faltered Goodheart, as the pistol was wrested from his grasp, its charge being wasted upon the grass, the bullet whistling in close proximity to the head of Frank Kershaw, as that worthy lay trembling under cover.

"Fer why ain't I? Don't be a fool, man! What's wrong wi' ye, anyhow?" impatiently added Tostivan.

"Hoss threw me—leg broke—I—" and the head of the traitor sunk down in the matted grass, like one dead.

But it was only a swoon. In the struggle for possession of the pistol, his right leg, broken both above and below the knee, was twisted beneath him, and the pain was more than he could endure. This much Curly ascertained, and then routed Kershaw out from his grassy covert, ordering him to go and cut a couple of stout poles from a creek-bank that he knew was only a short distance ahead. Kershaw obeyed, though in nowise relishing the task, since it must be performed alone. But he dared not cross the borderer.

Before he returned, Curly's face had grown much paler; a look of horror filled his eyes as he bent over the form of Goodheart, holding him motionless upon his back. The traitor was delirious, raving wildly, yet not so incoherently but that Curly knew that the wretch was black-hearted and guilty of many crimes—that blood had stained his hand—not in open fight, but the blood of a murdered victim; that he belonged to Black John's band—both himself and his brother, so lately found dead.

Swift retribution had overtaken the traitor, even as he was exulting in the complete success of his bold scheme. He had slipped away from the settlers his artfully-told story had deluded, and was riding at full speed toward the outlaw rendezvous, to prepare for the coming of the captives, when his horse stumbled, flinging him violently into the rocky bed of the creek. For hours he lay insensible, and only revived as the cold dew of heaven fell upon his face. Then, knowing that as soon as his foul treachery was discovered hot and persistent search would be made for him, he painfully and laboriously dragged himself out into the prairie, in the vain hope of finding friends. He had suffered agony the most intense with his broken leg, but the bitter dread urged him on and on, until his groans brought Curly Tostivan to his side. Believing Curly knew his crime, Goodheart had sought his life, in desperation. Seeing his failure, being now disarmed, his senses had given way.

Though he could only guess at the details, Curly gathered enough sense from the broken, disconnected ravings to know that a tragedy had been enacted at Barrett's in which this man had played a treacherous part, and he resolved that those most deeply injured should be the judges to decide the traitor's fate.

"Mebbe 'twas jest as well that I got that tumble, after all," he muttered thoughtfully. "Ef I hedn't this varmint 'd 'a' got clean away, or else died like a dog on the prairie. Mebbe the boys kin skeer the truth out o' him about this Black John. Ef so, durned ef I don't forgive greeny his awkwardness, an'—hello! here he comes now."

Kershaw had managed to secure suitable poles, and in a few minutes they had fashioned a rude litter, aided by their outer clothing and the stout, tough prairie-grass. Upon this they laid the cripple, and, not a little to Kershaw's astonishment, Curly bound him hand and foot to the poles, so that his head was the only member Goodheart could move. And then, each man bearing the end of one pole upon his shoulder, while the other ends dragged upon the ground, they took up their long and wearisome journey. Though the pain in his breast seemed growing less acute, Curly was often forced to rest, while poor Kershaw, totally unused to such rough experiences, could scarcely keep awake.

The sun was full two hours high when they first sighted the village of Barrett's, and, completely exhausted, Curly sunk down upon the ridge, firing shot after shot from his revolver. The reports were heard, and nearly a score of men came straggling out of the settlement, half-dressed, as though just roused from sound sleep.

A yell of execration greeted the pale, haggard captive, and for a time it seemed as though he would be sacrificed upon the spot by the men he had so cruelly deceived. But Curly stood over him with his remaining revolver, and swore to shoot the first man who touched the prisoner to do him injury until he had had a fair trial before JUDGE LYNCH. And reading death in the all borderer's eyes, the settlers calmed down, and dragged the litter into the village, others assisting Curly.

Though the rest did not notice it, one man turned pale, and shrunk back as he met the gaze of the prisoner. And as the captive was carried into the bar-room, this same man glided away

unobserved, and five minutes later was galloping swiftly away from the settlement.

Had he gone for help—or was he fleeing to save his own life?

There was little delay in making preparations for the trial. Nearly all the vigilantes who had ridden to the Twin Mounds the day before, were there. They had been snatching a few hours' rest, when the shots of Curly aroused them. The rest of the settlers were still in the saddle, searching for the kidnapped maidens.

As order was called, it was noticed that their chief was absent. The name of Wayne Appleton was loudly called; but no reply came. And yet he had been among those who went out to meet Curly Tostivan.

The captive smiled grimly as no answering voice came. Kent Morgan noticed the peculiar expression, and the old suspicion renewed itself in his breast. But he said nothing.

"Whar's the use wastin' time?" gruffly cried Abram Leigh. "I move that Curly Tostivan take the posish."

The motion was promptly seconded, and after a momentary hesitation, the borderer consented. If not strictly legal, his ministrations were prompt.

"Ike Goodheart, I reckon you know what you've done—did you do it or not—yes or no?"

"What am I 'cused of?" sullenly demanded the prisoner.

"Of bein' one of Black John's gang, an' of lyin' to an' foolin' the folks of this 'ere settlement, gin'ally."

"You cain't kill me fer playin' off a joke, I reckon, an' I hain't done nothin' more. How'd I know that them fellers was jest waitin' for a chance to slip in here?"

"You told a straighter story 'n that when you war layin' looney out on the prairie yender. Don't lie now."

"I won't. I know that I've got my death touch, anyhow, an' I'll make a clean breast of it. But fust send out fer that Wayne Appleton, as ye call him. He's BLACK JOHN!"

A yell of rage followed this communication. They believed Goodheart was maliciously lying. He added, solemnly:

"As sure as thar is a God in heaven, it's the truth. He is our chief. He w'ars a black mask when on the road. He uses false heels to make him taller, an' pads his body out to make him look bigger. He w'ars a vest of steel links. Brother Tom and I belonged to the gang. So does others that you think your friends, but I won't split on them. I owe him a grudge, or I wouldn't 'a' said so much. Now hang me if you will."

"Tell us whar the gals was taken to, an' we'll let you go yet."

"I don't know. He wouldn't tell me what he was up to. Ef I'd knowed he was aimin' at them, I'd defied him, though he killed me for't," was the quiet reply.

"Give us the names of all o' the gang. It's all that kin save you."

"Not ef you was to kill me twicet over. I must go under soon anyhow—I kin feel it in my leg," was the firm reply.

Curly earnestly consulted with the vigilantes, and pleaded for the man's life, since it was plain that death must soon claim its victim anyhow. But there was only this concession.

"Ike Goodheart, here's a pistol; which do you choose—that or the rope?"

He eagerly clutched the weapon, grimly smiling, and raised it to his temples. Muttering the name of his brother, he fired.

A faint quiver, then all was still. He was dead.

CHAPTER VII.

SWOOP OF THE ROAD-AGENTS.

IKE GOODHEART had spoken the truth in saying that the man known to the settlers as Wayne Appleton was in reality none other than the notorious Black John, the Road-Agent. And now, one or two other points may be cleared up.

Black John had attacked the stage-coach, for the sole purpose of killing Curly Tostivan, because the latter had shot Monte Pete, two years or more before. Monte Pete and Black John were brothers, and the bond of love was strong between them. For a year Black John hunted far and near for the slayer of his brother, but unsuccessfully. He lost the trail at Leavenworth, and while searching for it, in the character and dress of a gentleman, met May Howard at the house of a merchant whose acquaintance he had formed. The result was that he fell deeply in love, and, for the time forgetting his vow of vengeance, paid devoted attention to the fair young school-girl. Handsome, of good address and suave manners, appearing

the wealthy gentleman of leisure, a fine conversationalist, it is not to be wondered at that he made a deep impression upon the young, unsophisticated country girl who had seen so little of society, and when he avowed his love, May confessed that it was reciprocated. Yet she had sufficient strength of mind to resist his eloquence when he urged her to elope from school with him.

"First gain the consent of my parents," she said, "and I will no longer deny you. But I have never yet deceived them, nor will I do so now, though you know that I love you dearly."

And to this resolve she firmly held, despite his specious pleadings. Still hoping to conquer her, he continued the siege, knowing that keen-sighted Thomas Howard would not yield up his almost idolized child without closely inquiring into the character of the applicant, and he knew that his past life would not bear the scrutiny, cautious as he had been to conceal his connection with the Kansas outlaws.

In a fit of rage and mortification after one of these failures with May, he fell in with some of his old associates, and after drinking freely, joined them in a burglary. Reckless from drink, they were discovered, and after a tough fight with the police, were captured. The proof was so strong that Black John—or Appleton as he then called himself—could only put in the plea that he was drunk, which did not prevent his being sentenced to ten years' imprisonment at hard labor. After seven months of this life, he managed to escape by killing his guard, and fled to Texas. There he found no difficulty in getting together a number of desperate characters, suitable for his work; and learning that Curly Tostivan had lately been seen near Monte Pete's last tramping-ground, he returned to Kansas to make good his oath, assuming the disguise of a hideous negro. Through a creature of his own, he learned that Curly was booked for the stage to Barrett's, and that May Howard and Eunice Lee would return home by the same conveyance. Resolving to pay his debt of vengeance, Black John stopped the coach, in disguise, with the result stated in the first part of this story. The reader can now understand why he cautioned his men against injuring the ladies.

It was a bold move on his part to enter Barrett's as Wayne Appleton, when he knew that the country had been flooded with descriptions of that person, offering heavy rewards for his capture, *dead or alive*. But the sacrifice of his heavy beard and mustache had changed him greatly, and he resolved to chance discovery. He still entertained a faint hope of winning May to choose him in preference to her parents, by representing himself as the innocent victim of circumstances, though he had laid his plans for sterner measures. But this he wished to avoid if possible, knowing that such an outrage would make the country too hot for him.

He failed in his attempt, for May Howard had learned to know him in his true character. Unfortunately she hesitated to denounce him, though had she known he was Black John, she would have done so.

It was one of Appleton's men who assumed the disguise of the noted Road-Agent, and delivered Black John's defiance at the tavern door. And Appleton cunningly worked for the settlers to accept it. Fortune favored him greatly in his being chosen leader of the vigilantes. Upon the road he contrived to give Ike Goodheart the signal, and that worthy took the first opportunity to desert and return to Barrett's with his plausible tale.

Shortly after the second party left, half of the outlaws, under Limber Dick, entered the village, finding no one to dispute their will, dashed up to the Howard place and effected an entrance before a door could be closed. May and Eunice were seized and bound, Limber Dick exceeding his orders, for he, too, had a taste for a bright eye and a rosy lip, and resolved that Eunice Lee should be the reward of his exertions. Leaving old Mr. Howard lying dead upon the floor, a bullet through his brain, and Mrs. Howard in convulsions, the outlaws rode swiftly away.

Striking Little Timber creek, they entered its bed, separating, one-half riding up its gravelly bed, the other down. At intervals a single horseman would ride out from the creek, striking over the prairie, leaving as faint a trail as possible, by muffling the animals' hoofs. And so, one by one, long after nightfall, they rode into their retreat.

This was a peculiar spot, and well worthy a brief description, even did not the events yet to be narrated demand it. Nature had made a

snug hiding-place, and the hands of man now improved upon it.

A goodly-sized creek traversed the prairie. At this point it seemed to have cut its way through a considerable-sized ridge or swell, formed by a basin-like depression in the ground, the sides of which were almost perpendicular, some forty or fifty feet in height, of a stiff, yellowish clay, mixed with gravel and sandstone. This basin was nearly round, sixty yards in diameter. Stunted trees and bushes, interlaced with vines and climbing plants, covered the bottom and sides. Standing in their midst, a horseman would be invisible from the prairie above. Shallow both above and below, the creek had eaten a deep hole in the basin, so that, as its bed offered the only chance of entering, to gain the retreat, one was forced to swim. Such was the outward view of the basin.

Entering the creek some distance above, the outlaws rode down its bed, the swift current speedily obliterating what faint traces of their passage the gravelly bottom received. Their animals, well used to the water, unhesitatingly plunged into the deep, dark pool, scrambling up the cunningly-contrived stone landing, that so closely resembled the work of nature that even a minute examination might well fail to detect the cheat. One after another the horsemen disappeared amidst the undergrowth. Dismounting then, they advanced to the face of the bank. A mass of vines were lifted, revealing a dark opening in the ground. Into this the horses unhesitatingly glided. It was a spacious excavation, used as a stable. Upon the opposite side of the creek was another, something similar, used by the outlaws as a lodging-house, whenever they desired or were obliged to lie *perdu*.

Into this place the two maidens were carried. Naturally, they were greatly terrified, though, with the exception of being bound, they had been respectfully treated by the outlaws. They were deposited upon a soft pile of sweet-smelling prairie hay, and then a dim light shone around them as a rude lamp was ignited.

There was little to be seen. They were in a small chamber or alcove, connected by a low passage with the main excavation. The place was cool, and seemingly well ventilated, though by some means not visible to them. The walls were hung with numerous garments, evidently disguises as well as ordinary wear. And among them was a large assortment of weapons; rifles, pistols, knives, and Indian weapons. But at that moment, neither of our friends heeded them.

"Now, ladies," cried Limber Dick, a slight-built, lithe, wiry, not unhandsome villain, "this is destined to be your home for a few days—until the heat of pursuit and search is over. Then, I trust you will have more agreeable quarters. You are to be kept here, close guarded, while we throw your people off the scent, by a false trail. You shall be respectfully treated, and shall have every wish gratified—save one. Your liberty will come in due time, but not just yet. As a solace during the weary hours you must have before that day comes, I let you into a little secret. You, Miss Black-eyes, are to become the queen of our band—the bride of our noble chief, Black John—or Wayne Appleton, as you know him best. For you, pretty Golden-locks, fate has a little less exalted station—you will have to be resigned as the bride of Limber Dick—lieutenant of the band, your very humble servant," and the outlaw bowed low, with mock humility, a laughing devil in his jetty eyes, that caused a shudder to creep over the maidens, for, even in that moment of terror, they read this man aright—knew him for a cruel, crafty, relentless foe, to implore mercy from whom would be an idle waste of breath.

After amusing himself with a sight of their fear, Limber Dick turned and left the alcove. A faint signal came to his ear, and he knew that the outlaw look-outs had espied the approach of some person or persons. He knew that, long ere this hour, the discovery of the kidnapping must have been made, and that search would be immediately made, was beyond a doubt. In expectation of beholding a party of the settlers, then, Limber Dick ran up to the look-out point.

A single horseman was riding rapidly along the creek-bed, heading directly for the Refuge. The next moment he recognized his chief, Black John, or Wayne Appleton.

The outlaw chief could not force his animal to enter the dark pool of water, and Limber Dick adroitly passed through the entrance, and standing beside Black John, the latter, in a hard, stern voice, uttered:

"You have overdone the matter. Why did you kill that old fool? Surely you could have

managed without that! And then the other girl—did I tell you to carry her off, too?"

"You're too hard, Captain John," replied Limber Dick, in a quiet tone, but with his eyes glittering angrily at the censoring words. "That old man had the strength of a devil. He knocked down two of the boys with a chair, and made at me, when I dropped him; and you would have done the same, had you been in my place. As for the yellow-haired girl—surely you would not complain if a man helps himself while doing *your* work, as long as that is not neglected. Perhaps I mean to retire from this life, as well as you do."

"Well, well—let it pass," hastily muttered Black John, as he must be called henceforth, who well knew that were the outlaw gang to once suspect that he meant to desert them before many more days, a terrible storm would be the consequence. "If that is the case I have no objection. Only you must deal with her honorably, Dick, since she is a connection of my wife, that is to be."

"I'll follow the example you set me, Captain John," and Limber Dick laughed significantly.

"See that you do. But now to business, for I must be back to Barrett's before daydawn. The fools think me fast asleep, after our run of yesterday, from the Twin Mounds. I am running a risk coming here at all."

"The boys won't like your going back there, Captain John," slowly said Limber Dick.

"And why not?"

"Out of pure cussedness, I guess. You must know that some of them are already discontented. They seem to think you are taking it too easy—that you make them do all the dirty work," and Dick stole a covert glance at Black John's face.

"Lieber Dick," the outlaw chief said quietly, but with deep meaning in his tone, "you're a smart man, and no doubt can find out the one who is trying to sow dissension in the band. Go to him and tell him that he is playing with fire in a powder magazine, that, sooner or later, will explode and send him higher'n a kite. There can be but *one* leader of this band, and I am that man. Just hint to him what will be the consequence of his crossing my path. You understand me, so I think you will have no difficulty in making *him* comprehend."

"I'll see what I can do, Captain John," sullenly.

"All right. Now listen, and see that my instructions are carried out. You will leave three men here besides Little Billy, Ed. Ware, Nipper Dan and Dutch Bill. Tell them from me that if any thing happens to the ladies, they shall answer for it with their lives. You will take the rest of the boys and all the animals, and strike for the ravine by the Twin Mounds. There you will join the boys that run off the horses of the vigilantes yesterday. Follow the old Pottawatomie trail until you strike the Little Arkansas, then ride south to Crookford's. Dispose of all the horses there; he will give you fresh mounts. Then come back as far as the grove by Lance Poullen's where I will meet you. There'll be no danger of the vigilantes catching up with you, and the false trail will throw them completely off the right scent."

"And you?"

"I am the only one of the band that can go among them unsuspected—and they think that I am one of their best friends. I will see that they do not smell out this hole, and throw them off the scent if they press you too close. But go—there is no time to be lost, for a dozen or more of the settlers are out on the search now. If any of them sees you leave this, our game is up," impatiently cried Black John.

Though far from being satisfied, suspecting that he was allowing Black John to outwit him, Limber Dick dared not refuse or delay obedience to the chief's commands. And as the outlaw rode rapidly away, the lieutenant hastily gave his orders to them. To those who were to be left in charge of the captives, Dick was particularly careful in giving his instructions, adding his threats to those of Black John, in case they proved faithless. And then, plunging their horses into the water, the outlaws rode out of the Retreat, and far down the gravelly bed of the creek following the same precautions they had in entering, emerging one at a time, then gradually coming together again upon the prairie.

As the reader has seen, a part of Black John's plans miscarried, through the capture of Ike Goodheart. Feeling sure that the prisoner would confess, or at least betray *him*, if only to satisfy a grudge of long standing, Black John fled for dear life. Fearing lest he should draw suspicion upon the Retreat by pausing there, he

rode straight on to join his band, who were laying down the false trail.

Day after day rolled on, dragging slowly and painfully to the captive maidens, and hope died out in their hearts. It seemed as though they were deserted by all earthly friends. A little boy, or rather dwarfed man, brought them their rude meals regularly, but they were never suffered to leave the alcove without at least one of the three men as guard. And there was a brutal, licentious glow in their beastly eyes whenever they were near the maidens, that both May and Eunice decided to remain close prisoners rather than endure such trials. Still, more than once, they saw the outlaws conversing eagerly, eying them at the same time in a manner that chilled their very hearts. Then it was that they first bethought themselves of the weapons hanging upon the alcove walls.

CHAPTER VIII.

SEARCHING FOR THE LOST.

TIME rolled on and day succeeded day without bringing the bereaved parents any hope, and the vigilantes seemed as far off as ever from capturing Black John. Still, they had one slight consolation; the outlaw band no longer made the neighborhood dangerous, no longer took their pick from out the herds of cattle and droves of horses. They seemed to have left the country for good.

Black John's ruse had been perfectly successful. The vigilantes struck his trail and followed it to the bank of Little Arkansas. Here it was utterly lost. For miles and miles the shores were searched, but without success. Then, baffled and disgusted, the vigilantes returned home.

Their crops urgently demanded their attention. To lose more time would be ruinous. And so, though reluctantly, with a sigh for the sad fate that seemed inevitably the maidens', the settlers once more fell into their regular routine, with a few exceptions.

Thomas Howard did not die, and rallied slowly, almost imperceptibly. Doubtless his intense anxiety retarded his recovery. Hour after hour he would bemoan his sad fate, cursing himself, even his God, that he was forced to lie so helpless where determined action was needed. It was, indeed, hard, and there were those among the settlers who gave it as their opinion that Howard would not live to see the month out, unless some tidings of his children were gained.

The wife still lay upon what promised to be her deathbed. Since that dreadful day, when she beheld her children torn forcibly from her side, and saw her father lying at her feet, quivering in the agonies of death, she had not spoken a word. She lay in an apathetic stupor, motionless, seemingly lifeless, only for the wild rolling of her eyes, that never ceased save when under the influence of an opiate. Truly this household was sorely stricken.

There were two persons who refused to give up the search: Curly Tostivan and Kent Morgan, and to these might be added Frank Ker-shaw, though his services amounted to very little. Still it was well meant, and the two former were gradually learning to like Frank, despite his talent for boasting and evident lack of courage.

"Let 'em say what they will, Kent," Curly would remark, quietly, "I ain't satisfied that them gals is quite out o' reach yit. I'll tell ye why. You know we marked the critter's hoofs that Black John rid away on, the day Ike Goodheart chose the pistol. We follered it, until it struck the trail o' the rest o' the imps, nigh the Twin Mounds. We saw whar they hed been confined, waitin' fer him, most likely. But we didn't find no sign o' the gals havin' been thar. You know how we follered them up, hot foot, an' they couldn't 'a' had much the start of us. Is it likely that the gals, fresh from school, could have stood such a ride as that without givin' out? An' ef they hed give out, we'd hev seen some signs to tell of it. Then look back a bit. You know how the varmints tried to break the trail in Little Timber. You know that I took and follered the diffrunt trails, an' each one led into Big Stony. There I found whar they left it ag'in, an' made fer the Mounds. Ef the varmints intended to jump the country, why did they take all this trouble and lose so much time? Why didn't they strike out at fust, when they would be sure of a start sech as they wouldn't need to hurry themselves? I'll give you my idee. Only a part o' the gang left. T'other is still some'er not fur off, lyin' shady in their hidin'-places. An' when we find that place, we'll find the gals. Thar—that's my nosein' o' the matter."

"It may be true—but I doubt it, Curly. I fear they are lost beyond recovery. This is not

the sort of country where a number of people can easily find a covert to baffle such a search as ours has been."

"You heard what Ike Goodheart said afore he used the pistol—that thar was men belongin' to the band that we all thought our good friends. We don't know who they be, an' yit they may be hidin' these gals an' them as is in charge of 'em, like 's not in thar houses, under our very noses. But I think I've got a clow. We'll foller it up, an' see whar it'll end, anyhow. That's what we're ridin' for, now."

The friends were riding leisurely over the prairie. Morgan asked Curly to explain his words, which the latter did. In those days, many, indeed nearly all of the better class of settlers in Kansas, possessed slaves. One of these owners was Seth Cockton, an *emigre* from Kentucky. He owned a mulatto, named Yellow Ben. This Ben was in love with Abram Leigh's girl, Wichita Nance, the colored belle of that section.

In a recent visit, Yellow Ben, as the subject of the abduction came up, assumed a knowing air, saying that though the white people thought their negroes were fools, he was in possession of a secret worth the best farm in the territory; that one word of his could hang a dozen white men, and to insure his silence, Cockton had promised to buy Nance and give her to Yellow Ben for a wife. All this Wichita Nance repeated to Dandy Pete, one of Howard's slaves, whom she also had upon a string, and rather preferred to Ben. Dandy Pete, in turn, told Curly of this speech, and, catching at a straw, after having searched unsuccessfully for so long, Tostivan resolved to follow up the clow, though he knew that it might be nothing more than the idle boast of one who desired to gain importance in the eyes of his Dulcinea.

Fortune seemed to favor the trail-hunters, for as they rode up to the settler's building, they saw Yellow Ben going down to the spring, a hundred yards from the house, beside a thickly-timbered creek. Curly rode direct to the spot, and called Yellow Ben. Unsuspecting, the mulatto obeyed.

"Look here, Ben," quoth Curly, thrusting forward a revolver until its black muzzle almost touched the mulatto's face. "Did you ever see any thing like this before?"

"Don't, Mars' Curly—it mought go off!" stammered the terrified slave.

"An' so it will, ef you try to run, or tell me a lie. Let that speak once, an' you're a gone nigger! 'D hev to sweep ye up 'th a broom, sure!" chuckled the borderer.

"Deed I won't lie—deed I'll say any thin' you want me to, Mars' Curly."

"No, that won't do. I want you to tell the truth, an' nothin' else. Mind, I know a good deal o' the matter a'ready, an' 'll be sure to ketch you ef you try to lie. An' then you're a dead nigger, as I said afore."

"You'll frighten him so bad that he won't be able to speak, Tostivan," interposed Kent Morgan, seeing how the negro quailed and trembled before the cocked revolver.

"I'll do more than skeer him, unless he talks straight. Now, Ben, I know you, and you know me, I reckon. You ought to know whether I'm 'customed to lie or not. I don't want to hurt you, very much, but I'll do it unless you make a clean breast of it. Now tell me: what is this secret you have found out, that makes your master afeard o' you?" he added, sharp and quick.

"Don't know any—'deed I don't, Mars' Curly," faltered Ben, turning a shade paler.

"Easy thar, boy. Smell o' this persuader—don't ye hear the bullet a-beggin' me to let it out at ye? Don't ye hear it say that you're tryin' to lie to me? Ef you don't know nothin', then what is old Cockton goin' to buy Wichita Nance an' give her to you fer a wife, fer? He's got more niggers now than he's got honest work fer 'em to do."

"Wichita Nance done tole ye what I tole her?" gritted the mulatto, his eyes glittering snakily.

"Never you mind whether she did or not; that don't matter. I ax you what's the reason? No foolin', now—speak right out, flat-footed."

"It's all a lie, den. I don't know nuffin," sullenly.

"Hold my critter, Kent," cried Curly, as he leaped from the saddle and grasped the slave by the throat.

Yellow Ben was no infant, and he struggled desperately, crying aloud for help; but Curly, though not entirely recovered from his fall upon the prairie, was a giant in strength and skill. In twenty seconds, he held the mulatto helpless on the ground.

"The old man's coming, Curly," warningly cried Kent.

"Let him. I'll put a spoke in his wheel, ef he cuts up nasty. Lay still, Ben—ef you move, I'll flatten a bullet ag'in that bull-head o' yourn. I ain't through with you yit."

"What does this outrage mean—what are you doing with my boy?" angrily demanded Cockton, hastily advancing, with cocked revolver in his hand.

"Easy thar, old man," coolly retorted Curly, swiftly raising his weapon. "Don't go off at half-cock. Keep your we'pen down, or I'll make a pepper-box o' you, sure. Kent, you look to the nigger while I talk to the old man."

"What has he done?" asked Cockton, more calmly. "What business can you have with him? Have you turned nigger-stealer?"

"No, nor gal-stealer, nuther. But you ax my business. Mebbe you know that the settlers hev 'lected me chief of the vigilantes. I'm on that business now, an' I wouldn't 'vise you to interfere, or we mought hev a word to say to you, big an' mighty as you might think yourself. The fact is jest this: Your boy, Yellow Ben, knows a secret that we want to find out. Ef he won't tell peaceably, then we mean to whip him until he does tell. Now ye hev it."

"You have no right to misuse my property. I will not stand it," angrily cried Cockton.

"Hinder us ef you kin, old cock. Kent, you jist keep an eye on the cuss, an' ef he shows mischief, down him. I begin to think we're gittin' purty close at the truth now."

Morgan quietly covered the settler with his revolver, a stern resolve written plainly on every line of his features. Seth Cockton read this aright, and saw Curly seize and bind Yellow Ben hand and foot, without daring to lift a finger in his defense. Then, as he cut and coolly trimmed a number of slender hickory withes, Curly Tostivan questioned the captive mulatto.

"Now, my boy, jest open your ears, ef you please. You see these saplings, I reckon, but mebbe you don't know jest what they're 'tended for. They're to freshen your mem'ry with, so that you kin answer the questions I ax you. As a frind, I 'vise you to act sensible, an' tell all you know, fer ef you don't, you'll think that all the cuttin'-up you ever got in your life afore, was on'y buckwheat cakes an' 'lasses 'longside the one I'll give ye."

"He knows nothing about—"

"Shet up, you! Don't interrupt the court ef you please. Jest let him hce his own row. Ef you hev too much to say, the vigilants may hev a word to say to you," pointedly said Curly; then, turning to the mulatto: "You told Wichita Nance that you know a secret wuth the best farm in the kentry—that one word from you could hang half a dozen white men—that Cockton here was afeard of you, an' was a-goin' to buy her to give you fer a wife. Now, what did you mean hy that, eh?"

"Tell the truth, Yellow Ben; but if you dare to lie—"

"Old man, you dry up. Kent, ef he speaks ag'in 'thout bein' spoken to, down him. Now, boy?"

"I was jest a-lyin' to Nance," he muttered sullenly.

"You've lied to either her or me, anyway, so here goes!"

The lithe hickory rod whistled through the air, and descended with cutting force fairly across the mulatto's buttocks. Swiftly succeeding each other, the strokes fell, and, writhing upon the ground in vain efforts to burst his bonds asunder, Yellow Ben roared like an enraged buffalo-bull. Twice did Curly pause in his work and repeat the question, but the slave refused to confess, or rather declared that he had been merely boasting to the girl, in order to enhance his value in her eyes.

"You're lyin' yet, I know, fer Abram Leigh tole me old Cockton hed bin tryin' to buy Nance. But I reckon I kin stand it as long as you kin," and the lashes were continued.

During this scene Seth Cockton chafed angrily, but the steady hand of Kent kept him covered with a revolver-muzzle, and he feared to interfere, but the crisis was near at hand. Yellow Ben could no longer endure the stinging pain of the hickory gads, and cried out:

"I'd tell, but Marse Cockton'd kill me!"

"No, he shain't—look out, Kent!"

Suddenly leaping to one side, Cockton seized his revolver and fired at Morgan. The young man, taken partly by surprise, sprung forward, then fell heavily to the ground. With a shrill screech, Curly leaped forward and closed with the would-be murderer. As they fell to the ground, the pistol exploded, but without doing any damage.

Morgan sprung to his feet, and rushed forward to where the antagonists had rolled, but Curly cried out:

"Keep off, Kent—I kin mairidge the varmint!" Nor was this any idle boast. Tostivan speedily gained the upper hand, and soon choked the settler into acquiescence.

"Gi' me the trail-rope, Kent," he panted, still kneeling upon the settler. "We'll put the imp out o' the way o' doin' more mischief. But you ain't hurt?" he added, quickly.

"A scratch on the neck; nothing more. I saw him in time to dodge. But it's strange no one comes from the house. They must have heard the fuss."

"Reckon they're all out herdin' or at work on the farm. He ain't got no white women. Thar—he'll do now," and Tostivan rose from the body of his foe, who was bound and gagged, beyond the possibility of escape, unaided.

"Don't whip me any mo', Mars' Curly, an' I'll tell all I know," pleaded Yellow Ben.

"Go ahead, then; but be quick, an' no lyin' or—"

The mulatto then stated that he had long known his master was connected with the horse-thieves and outlaws—indeed, he had left Kentucky because suspicion was aroused, justly, that he was one of a regularly organized gang. Two days before this one, Yellow Ben saw a man, whom he recognized as one Dutch Bill, in close conversation with Cockton, seated in the house. By close creeping, Yellow Ben managed to get beneath the window, where he could hear their words. Dutch Bill was asking for some whisky, saying that it would be more than three days before Black John returned, and it was dry work watching the girls. Cockton asked where they were. Dutch Bill replied—in the bank. This was all that Yellow Ben heard, as they started for the out-door cellar for the liquor, and he feared being discovered.

"It's a plenty, too. I think I know right whar to put my hands on 'em; it's the only place nigh here that they could hide in a bank," cried Curly, exultantly.

"But you won't let him loose?" dolefully uttered Ben. "Marse 'd kill dis nigger, suah, fo' tellin' on him."

"I want you to keep watch over him, boy, until day; then it's like the vigilantys 'll come fer him. Ef you've told the truth, you're a made nigger from this minnit, but, ef you've bin lyin', so help me Jerusalem bulbugs! I'll skin you alive, an' salt you down fer corn beef."

Yellow Ben earnestly protested that he had told nothing but the truth, and the two vigilantes believed him. Cockton was stowed away in an old "dug-out," a hole in the bank roofed over, and Ben put upon watch.

Then the two trail-hunters rode away in the gathering darkness.

CHAPTER IX.

LITTLE BILLY.

MAY and Eunice saw with sickening hearts the black peril that threatened them, drawing closer and closer every day, every hour. At first they had scarcely comprehended its magnitude, but the day came that opened their eyes.

True they had noticed that the outlaws left in guard of them constantly eyed them with strangely intent looks, but at length the burning, brutal expression could no longer be disguised, and one day Dutch Bill threw off the thin disguise.

He had been drinking freely. The other two outlaws were asleep, half-stupefied with the fiery corn-juice. Dutch Bill, a gaunt, bony-framed man, bold and reckless at all times, but doubly so when in his cups, staggered into the alcove where the maidens were crouching upon their couch of prairie-grass, terrified by the words and hints that had reached their ears from the men drinking in the main chamber.

With his feet widely separated, to gain a sturdier base, Dutch Bill leered at the girls, hiccupping, as he attempted to speak. He spoke in his native tongue, and this so disguised by liquor, that neither of them could make out his words; but there could be no mistaking his meaning.

How the matter would have ended it is difficult to say, had there not come interference at this moment. A dark figure bounded past the uneasily swaying form of the drunken brute, and stood between him and the women. It was Little Billy.

By this name alone the maidens knew him; it was what the outlaws called him, what he called himself, and very likely this was the only name he had ever possessed. For Little Billy was a stray. No one knew from whence he had sprung. He never knew anything of his pa-

rents, and half-believed that he had never been born of human; far down in his wild, untutored heart was a fantastic belief—Little Billy believed that his father was some lordly buffalo-bull, his mother, one of the wild, graceful, soft-eyed does that he could never bring himself to draw bead upon. Often, crouching behind the sun-reflecting waters of the Big Stony, Little Billy would amuse himself by tracing the points of resemblance between himself and these animals. He had the great shaggy head, thick short neck and humped shoulders of the buffalo-bull; the large, lustrous, beautiful eyes, the slender, yet symmetrical, steel-sinewed limbs of the wild deer. Perhaps it was these points that first gave Little Billy the fantastic idea, but it was heightened by the contempt and ridicule that all men heaped upon him. No one had a kind or pleasant word or look for him. He was cursed, kicked and buffeted at every turn. From childhood he had lived among outlaws and criminals. And yet, though nearly stifled beneath the weight of sin and crime, Little Billy still possessed a heart capable of fidelity and love, though unsuspected by himself, until aroused to the truth by the kind speech of May and Eunice. Though at first the maidens had shuddered at the sight of the dwarf, he did not appear so terrible to them as the others of their guards, and smothering their feelings, they had spoken to him kindly, and thanked him for the little services he rendered them. And now this brought forth fruit.

"Back thar, Dutch Bill," cried Little Billy, the black muzzle of a cocked revolver staring the drunkard in the face. "You come one step furdur, an' I'll spile you fer whisky-drinkin'. You know me—so go back, while you kin."

The outlaw spluttered forth a volley of curses and threats, but the dwarf did not quail. As the man's hand fumbled at his belt, Little Billy quickly added:

"Draw a we'pon, Dutch Bill, an' you won't live to fire it. You're actin' the fool, now, an' when you git sober, you'll be sorry for it. Have you forgot what Limber Dick told you the cap'n said? Ef he knowed this, he'd kill you like a coyote."

These words made an evident impression upon the drunken outlaw, and after hesitating a moment, he turned and staggered back to the outer chamber. Little Billy quietly crouched down beside the entrance, with revolver resting upon his lap. He was not yet satisfied that the danger was past. He had heard more said that afternoon than ever before. The three outlaws, still further brutalized by constant drinking, had spoken openly of betraying the trust reposed in them by Black John, of appropriating the captives, of taking such articles and supplies from the general store as they coveted or would require, and then turning their faces toward the south, where, among the foothills, they could start in business upon their own hook. All this they had spoken of without paying any heed to the presence of Little Billy. He was beneath their notice.

When Dutch Bill returned to his comrades, after his discomfiture, they once more began drinking and playing cards. The stakes were novel. They were playing for the captive maidens. With drunken gravity they played on, cheating and cheated, disputing about the score of the game, until, more than once, weapons were drawn and blows struck, only to end in a general reconciliation and hand-clasp over another drink.

Little Billy listened and watched closely. He felt that a crisis was drawing near. And, remembering only the kind words of the captives, he prepared to meet it as best he might. From the weapons hanging upon the wall, he selected two small revolvers, that were in tolerable order. These he carefully loaded and capped. Then he placed them in the hands of May and Eunice.

"Mebbe you won't need to use 'em, but it's best to be on the safe side. Them varmints out yonder mean mischief. They shain't hurt ye while I kin keep 'em back, but I'm on'y a little cuss anyhow, an' they mought rub me out. Then, if you didn't hev these, you'd be goners, sure. Ef they do try to tetch ye, don't be afraid to shoot. Try an' kill 'em. Mebbe you'll miss, an' they'll be mad enough to kill you, but don't let that skeer you. I reckon you'd be better off dead than in their hands when they's drunk. You understand me?"

"Yes—and thank you for thinking of us. We will do as you say. They shall not lay hands on us alive," quietly, but firmly, replied May Howard, her courage rising as the black peril stood out more clearly before them. "But you—they will kill you for this."

"Let 'em. Folks must die some time. I ain't skeered at the thought o' death. I'm only Little Billy, anyhow. What's the defence? Nobody wouldn't miss me. But thar—I reckon we'd best shut up. Mebbe the varmints out yonder 'll forgit all about us if they don't hear us talkin', for they're sp'ilin' corn-juice mighty fast."

"Little Billy, come nearer. I wish to speak with you," softly whispered May.

With a strange tingling in every fiber of his misshapen form, the dwarf obeyed. He knew right well what the maiden meant to say, for more than once she had pleaded with him in a like manner, though he had ever refused to grant her prayer. He said that he could not betray his chief—could not be false to the trust reposed in him by Black John, even for their sakes. But never before had he felt just as he did now. The events of the past few hours had changed him. He saw that a terrible danger threatened the captives, a danger that his single arm could scarcely hope to avert longer.

"Little Billy, you say that you are our friend. Prove it now. Help us to escape from this place and these fearful men. Help us to return home, and nothing you can ask of us will be refused. You will find a welcome home there, and warm hearts to love you for the sake of your truth to us. You live in sin here. Surely you owe these people nothing. Surely you cannot love or respect them. Then, listen to our prayer, and aid us now that we need your help so badly. You say that you love us, and would die to keep us from harin. Then why do you assist these men in keeping us captives? You know what they have threatened—you know what they are now doing—playing cards to decide which shall possess Eunice and I. They are three strong, desperate villains. You cannot hope to resist them, successfully. They will kill you first, and then—what will become of us?"

"Thar—don't cry any more. I'll do what I kin, though it mayn't be much. No—don't thank me. Wait until I do the work. But you must keep ready. Don't sleep. Keep your we'pons ready for use, if my plan fails. Ef you see them git the better o' me, you know what to do. Shoot them ef you kin—if not, then shoot your own selves. Better that than what'll come with them a-hold o' ye."

At that moment Nipper Jim called Little Billy. The dwarf promptly obeyed. He had formed a hasty plan, rude and frail, but he hoped to be able to carry it out, as the outlaws were pretty well blinded with drink. He lifted the stone jug to his lips, and seemingly drank freely. Then he said:

"Boys, the corn-juice is gittin' mighty sca'ce. Let's play seven-up to see who goes to old Cockton's for a fresh lot. What say?"

As he had anticipated, an eager assent followed. The outlaws, who had fully determined to break loose from all authority and possess the maidens, still hesitated about acting, while Little Billy stood their protector. They feared his fatal accuracy with his revolver. In that respect the dwarf had no equal in the band, while he had never been able to master the subtle intricacies of the "devil's prayer-book." Knowing that they could easily beat him at that, they quickly assented. It would take full two hours to return with the whiskey from Cockton's. During that absence, the captives would be wholly at their mercy.

In their secret glee, they readily consented to the condition imposed by the dwarf, though had their brains been clear, they must have read the truth, that Little Billy was only fighting for time. He proposed that each man should play a rubber, the loser of the first to play with the next, and so on until the matter was decided. By this means he felt that the needed time would be gained, as the sun was already low down in the west.

Before beginning the last game, Little Billy made some excuse and glided in to where the captives were awaiting the result in sickening suspense. He hastily sketched the plan he had formed, and told them what they must do. It was a desperate course, but the only one that remained them. Its only hope of success lay in the semi-drunkenness of the three outlaws.

Returning to his game, Little Billy played slowly and cautiously. The first one was against him. In a well-simulated fit of anger, he flung down the cards, upsetting the rude lamp that alone lighted up the chamber. All was darkness the most intense.

"Stay still, boys," cried the dwarf, in a loud voice. "I'll git a light. You're too drunk—you'd bu'st the whole house up. Stay thar until I git back."

"Hellow! who's that? I felt somebody brush past me jest then!" suspiciously cried Nipper Jim.

"It's only me, you looney," retorted Little Billy, in a voice that trembled despite himself. "Look out thar—you'll upset me with the lamp, if you don't take keer."

The outlaw subsided, and then the faint flicker of a match revealed the dwarf's features. Only for a moment, however, then it expired. So did the next three or four, Dutch Bill drunkenly cursing Billy's clumsiness. But at length the lamp was ignited, and the cards resumed. Playing with unusual skill, the dwarf won the second game. After a tight contest, Nipper Jim scored the third and last rubber, aided by his skill at cheating.

"You're to go, lad," he cried, exultantly.

"All right. Gi' me the jug. You fellers come to help me through the water," quietly replied Little Billy.

He plunged through the pool, going up the creek, as that was the nearest route to Cockton's. The jug was flung him, and then he struck across the prairie, the outlaws watching him. A few moments later he was lost to view amidst the tall grass. And the outlaws chuckled gleefully as they felt that the only obstacle to their scheme was now removed from their path.

"But we must wait a bit, fust," said Nipper Jim, the most prudent one of the trio. "It's like they'll make a fuss, an' Little Billy's got powerful sharp years. He'd make us trouble ef he heard it—he's heavy on the shoot."

The dwarf had sunk down in the prairie-grass, abandoning the jug, and gliding swiftly around to strike the creek below the basin. He knew that there was no time to lose, for with the discovery would come instant pursuit.

The moon shone brightly, not a cloud obscuring the sky. Little Billy noted this with a curse. A cloudy night would have insured an escape, but now—His musings ceased, as a faint rustle sounded in the grass beside him. In a low tone, he uttered the names of the two maidens. With glad cries, they rose before him.

They had taken advantage of Little Billy's upsetting the light, and had glided from the alcove, through the outer chamber. Gaining the basin, they did not hesitate, but boldly plunged into the water, buoyed up by their clothes, until the swift current swept them into shallow water. Then they had awaited the coming of the dwarf, hidden in the grass.

Feeling sure that their flight must soon be discovered, Little Billy bade the maidens follow him, and he struck off over the prairie, crouching low down in the grass. The course he pursued was one that led them almost directly away from Barrett's, though the girls did not notice this at first. He knew that the outlaws would believe the fugitives had made at once for their friends, and would naturally direct their search in that belief. By making a wide circuit, Billy hoped to elude them.

Scarcely had he explained to the girls, than the alarm came to his ears. The escape had been discovered.

Little Billy led them rapidly over the prairie. He knew that the discovery would serve to sober the outlaws, and when not under the influence of liquor, they were bold, cunning men, well skilled in the craft and lore of the prairies. Let them once strike the trail, and they would follow it to the end.

For over an hour they had pressed on thus. Then Little Billy paused, with a curse. At only a little distance before them, he could faintly distinguish several dim, phantom-like forms. He believed the outlaws had intercepted them.

In the faint hope of their not noticing him, he crouched down in the grass, before the two maidens, his revolver cocked and ready for use. In painful suspense, they awaited the result.

A faint rustling in the stiff prairie-grass came to Little Billy's ears. He raised his revolver. Then a dark face rose into view, and seemed to be peering upon them.

The pistol cracked. A shrill screech of death-agony followed, as the face disappeared.

Pandemonium seemed turned loose upon earth. Wild, horrible yells filled the air. Dusky forms sprung forward. Little Billy arose, with a revolver in either hand. With every report a foeman fell, dead or dying.

CHAPTER X.

SETTING A MAN-TRAP.

It was this same hour that Curly Tostivan and Kent Morgan rode over the prairie from Seth Cockton's, with the knowledge they had

extracted from the tortured Yellow Ben. Given an idea by the words of the mulatto, Curly was eager to test it, and now he was headed direct for the prairie "basin"—the retreat of the Road-Agents.

He had noticed this spot more than once, and had scanned it curiously from either side, though he had never explored it. It had not seemed worth while getting a wet skin, and he knew that the basin could not be entered without swimming.

It may appear strange that this place had not been thoroughly searched since the abduction of May and Eunice, but the Road-Agents' trail had been followed miles beyond the point, nor had they doubled upon their tracks. There was nothing to direct suspicion toward the sink. Not until he heard the words of Yellow Ben did the thought occur to him. *Hiding in the bank!* The nearly perpendicular sides of the basin—might they not contain some hole or cave, its entrance concealed by the masses of trailing vines and bushes? And as he could remember no other spot half so likely, Curly was riding thither.

The comrades were yet considerably more than a mile distant from their point of destination, when a peculiar sound caused them to draw rein abruptly. Soaring over the prairie, borne to their ears by the favoring breeze, came the faint sound of human voices. Some person or persons were yelling or shouting angrily.

"It comes from mighty nigh the sink, Kent," muttered Curly, his ear bent in listening. "Somethin's up."

"Perhaps our friends have discovered the hiding-place, and are attacking it—come, let's hurry!" eagerly cried Morgan.

"Easy, Kent. You may be right, but 'tain't likely. Ef you air, we'll be in plenty time; ef not, then 'twon't do to run the risk o' sp'illin our chance before we begin. Cool an' easy's the word now," said Curly, as he sprung to the ground.

"What's that for? Going to camp out here for to-night?" testily asked Morgan.

"Sca'cely. Git down an' hitch your critter. Thar's plenty feedin' to keep 'em quiet until we're ready for 'em."

"What under the sun are you up to, Curly? Is this your famous plan?" fumed Morgan.

"Part of it. You're too durned curious, Kent. Don't you know me well enough to foller my lead blind for a while? 'Light an' tie; I'll tell you what I mean."

Kent Morgan obeyed, and while unwinding the long trail-ropes, and thrusting the picket-pins lightly into the earth. Tostivan condescended to explain.

"It's one of two things, either the gals is hidden in this basin or sink, or else they ain't. Ef they air, then they're close watched, in co'se. Is it likely, then, that we could ride right up to it, 'thout bein' seen? Sca'cely. Ef they ain't thar, then we're no wuss off than afore, 'cept a little creepin' that'll be good exercise. Now do you see it?"

"Yes—and you were right," acknowledged Kent.

"Then foller me in all that I do. Don't talk—save your breath ontel it's needed more," said Curly, as he glided away through the stiff, rustling grass.

In this manner, crouching low down until their heads alone appeared above the level coat of green, the two friends glided cautiously on, not knowing where the outlaw look-outs might be posted. Curly was one of those rare men who never throw away a chance in whatever he undertook. Though by no means feeling certain that his surmise was right, he acted as though he knew that the outlaws were actually at the basin and upon their guard.

They had nearly gained the spot, when a second alarm came to their ears, this time coming from a greater distance than before, and from a different direction. A faint report, a series of shrill yells; then more firing, rapid and confused. With puzzled looks the two friends eyed each other. There was something going on beyond their comprehension.

"Shall we make for the muss?" asked Kent.

"No. Yonder's the sink. Finish one thing fust, that's my motto. We'll soon find out now what thar was in the nigger's words. Keep down ahind me."

A few moments later Curly crouched down by the creek, at the point where it entered the basin. He listened intently. All was still. The basin seemed deserted. Only for the double alarm, he might have abandoned the project at that point, but he felt now that this spot contained the solution of the mystery that had so long baffled them, and he proposed to enter.

"You'll stay here, Kent, an' listen. Ef you hear any rumpus, make fer the hosses, an' don't stop ontel you rout up the vigilantes. Then lead 'em here, hot foot."

"And desert you? Not much!"

"The gals is worth more'n I am," quietly. "Ef any o' the varmints is here, then it's ten to one they've got the gals with 'em. We're the only ones that suspect this hidin'-place; then whar'd thar chauce be if we both got rubbed out?" No, lad, you must promise me this."

"You're right, Curly; I will do what you say. But if you come to harm, there'll be a big price for some one to pay."

"The bigger the better, lad, jest so you charge the right ones," grimly replied Curly, as he entered the water, holding his revolvers above his head.

Silently as a muskrat, the scout swam on through the black pool, for the moonlight did not reach here, intercepted by the banks. Beneath an overhanging bush he paused and listened intently. Not a sound, save those of Nature's voices, came to his ear. The basin seemed uninhabited save by himself.

The next moment Curly uttered a low, involuntary cry. As he cautiously raised his head, a dim, twinkling point of light met his eye. And then Curly knew that he had discovered the secret retreat of the Road-Agents.

Naturally excited, he yet proceeded with cautious coolness. The first motion he made hid the light from his eyes, but he knew what that meant. A bunch of leaves had intervened.

Silently he crept from the water, and then advanced toward the spot where he had seen the dim light. The next moment he caught sight of it again. A small lamp sat upon the ground, its uncertain light cast over a scattered deck of cards, several rude articles of war and a blanket or two. But nothing could be seen or heard of any living being. Yet the lamp, the cards, all bore evidence that such had very recently been within the den, and the probabilities were that that were still near. Perhaps they had caught some sound, warning them of an enemy's approach, and were lying in ambush. The thought was natural.

Tired of waiting so uselessly, Curly measured his distance, and ejected a stream of tobacco-spit so dextrously that the light, with a sudden splutter, went out. Curly knew that if the den was indeed tenanted, this occurrence would be almost certain to cause some stir or confusion among them. But all remained still. Not a sound came to his ears.

As he peered into the darkness, he became aware that another lamp was burning within the den; though hidden from him, he could distinguish a faint, hazy sheen crossing the gloom like a ray of moonlight.

"I'll risk it, anyhow," he muttered, beneath his breath, then, with the bared blade of a stout knife tight clutched between his teeth, he crept forward upon hands and knees, entering the den.

In their discovery of the captives' flight, the drunken outlaws had thrust the leafy screen hastily aside, omitting to replace it. Only for this fact, Curly might never have discovered the entrance; certainly not so easily.

Half-expecting to see the glare of a pistol-shot, or feel the keen thrust of the deadly knife with every movement, Curly still advanced toward the faint ray. Then he saw that it proceeded from a smaller chamber: the alcove that had so recently been the prison of the abducted maidens.

One quick glance showed him that it was unoccupied, and then he ventured in. He discovered unmistakable evidence that the lost ones had lately been there. But where were they now?

As this thought chilled his heart, Curly heard a faint whistle from without, and recognized Kent Morgan's signal. Feeling that this portended danger, he instantly retraced his steps, and plunging into the pool, swam rapidly to where the young man crouched.

"What is it—what's up?" whispered Curly.

Morgan did not speak, but replied with a gesture. Following it, Tostivan made out the shapes of three men, rapidly advancing down the valley, following the creek bed. Beyond all doubt, they were returning to the Retreat.

"The gals are gone, but not many hours. These varmints, it's likely, knows whar they be, an' we must find out. I'll pick off the fust, you 'tend to the hinder one. The middle one we must take pris'ner," hurriedly muttered Curly.

"But maybe they're honest men—friends."

"Don't be a fool! Hist! now," continued Tostivan.

The men were talking earnestly as they ap-

proached, and spoke quite loudly in order to drown the splashing in the shallow water. As if to settle the doubts of Kent Morgan, these words came to the listeners' ears, Nipper Jim speaking:

"That job's played, then, an' the sooner we leave this, the better. Black John'd think we was lyin' to him 'bout the gals."

The reply to this, if any was made, was drowned by the simultaneous report of two revolvers, and the bodies of Nipper Jim and Dutch Bill floundered in the water, dyeing it red with their life-blood. Ed Ware stood alone, seemingly petrified with surprise and horror.

Then Curly sprang from his covert, and clutched the outlaw by the throat, flinging him, unresisting, to the shore. In a moment, ere he had recovered from his stupor, he was bound and gagged.

"Ketch hoit an' help kerry him up into the taller grass, lad," hastily uttered Curly, with a quick, searching glance around. "Thar's no tellin' how many more o' the varmints thar may be nigh, an' we must pump this feller afore he has a chance to git away."

Morgan readily lent a hand, and the next minute the scouts and their captive had disappeared amidst the rank grass. No trace was left visible of the recent tragedy, save in the two forms that floated slowly round and round in the eddy, gradually yielding to the influence of the current that was to bear them out into the prairie, far away from the scene of their death. Unloved they had lived, unmourned they died.

For some minutes Curly and Morgan crouched beside the tremoling outlaw, their weapons drawn and ready for use. But no further alarm came. All was still and quiet over the prairie: a silence that gradually began to be oppressive to the two scouts, bold and resolute as they were.

"Now, my man," at length observed Tostivan, speaking distinctly in the prisoner's ear, "you jest listen a bit to me. I don't s'pose you know who we air. This man here is a Government detective, sent out to larn the rights o' this Black John business. I'm Curly, a sort of a guide to him, an' now the cap'n of the Barrett's vigilantes. So you kin likely tell jest how much fooling we'll stand from you. It'll take a heap to make us overlook what you have did; the fust thing for you to do is to answer our questions. Now tell me, whar is them gals you helped steal away from Barrett's?"

As he spoke, Curly released the gag from the distended jaws. Ed Ware gasped for breath, then uttered:

"If I tell all, will you let me go free, and not deliver me up to them vigilantys? They'd murder me!"

"Tain't your turn to ax questions. We don't make tarms with no seech car'on. Don't rile me. You mought get hurt," impatiently muttered Curly, as his knife-point pricked the outlaw's throat.

"They escaped—Little Billy helped 'em give us the slip, not more'n an hour ago. We heard pistol-shootin' an' yellin', as we war out huntin' fer them, an' thought the vigilantys had run 'em down, shootin' Little Billy by mistake," sullenly replied Ware.

"Jest afore we opened on ye, over thar, we heard you say somethin' about Black John's comin' back. When 'll he be here? No lyin', now."

"We 'lowed he'd be here sometime to-morrow. But it's all guess-work 'th him."

"How many o' you is around this shebang?"

"Ain't any, now, since Little Billy run'd off, an' you killed Dutch Bill an' Nipper Jim an' nabbed me. The boss only left us four with the gals."

"Morgan, you hear this. I b'lieve the cuss is tellin' the truth. Ef so, the boys must know it all afore day comes. We can lay a trap here fer Black John, an' bag the hull outfit easy. Besides, the gals must be looked up. I don't like the rumpus we heard over thar. It may be that the varmints is back ahead o' thar time, or mebbe a skulkin' band o' red-skins has picked 'em up. Anyway, they must be found. Go you an' fetch up the critters. I'll fix this varmint ready fer totin'. You must take him to Barrett's. It's like we'd need him fer a witness. He's jest coward enough to blow on his comrades to save his or'nery life."

Kent lost no time in obeying the advice, or rather orders, and ten minutes later he was riding rapidly away over the prairie toward Barrett's, leading the horse upon which the craven Ware was securely bound.

After watching him for a moment, Curly Tostivan glided over the hill toward the point

whence had proceeded the wild night-alarm, feeling sure that he would gain some clew to the fate of the fugitive maidens.

Guided by the instinct that long experience gives the true plainsman, Curly soon stood upon the spot where we last saw Little Billy and his charges. With a sickening sensation Tostivan bent low over the blood-stained and trampled grass. He saw that a tragedy had been enacted here, and he feared the worst. Then he stumbled over a body buried in the grass. A sigh of relief parted his lips as he noted the large, shaggy head and harsh features. He had feared lest his eyes should light upon a fairer face.

Only that one body did he find; the mangled corpse of the dwarf, Little Billy. Yet he could see where others had fallen, by the matted and gory grass, that still retained the impress of the bodies.

For an hour or more he quartered the prairie, but the sign was hard to read by the uncertain moonlight, and he was but little the wiser when he retraced his steps to the basin. And there he waited and watched until Morgan's return, with a number of vigilantes. Others had been sent for. Before daydawn the entire settlement would be afoot.

And before sunrise the trap was set, and the searchers at work.

CHAPTER XI.

VULTURE AND COYOTE.

YES, Little Billy was dead, had died fighting desperately, in the vain hope of saving the two maidens from falling into the clutches of the prairie coyotes, the Kickapoos. Undaunted by the score of enemies who sprang up around him as his revolver spoke the death-knell of the foremost brave, Little Billy faced them with unflinching courage, his pistols rapidly detonating, carrying death with every bullet. The prairie-grass around him was crushed flat by the falling forms. Uttering their blood-curdling death-shrieks, the savages fell, quivering, writhing, plucking and tearing at the stiff grass that was now dampened and dyed crimson with their hearts' blood. And the dwarf stood there, bold, defiant, as yet unharmed.

But then an irresistible rush was made, and after a brief, confused struggle, Little Billy went down before the weight of numbers. Then the writhing mass arose. But Little Billy lay motionless. He was dead. His body bled from a hundred wounds. It was hacked almost to pieces. But the scalp was left untouched. The savages feared to take this; that would too plainly proclaim the authors of the tragedy, and they were "at peace."

May and Eunice had been eye-witnesses of this tragedy, spell-bound with horror, unable to take advantage of the terrible confusion to flee, as they might have done.

Now, as the savages drew back from the quivering, mangled corpse that had once been Little Billy, one brave, bleeding from a bullet-wound through his face, discovered them as they crouched down in the prairie-grass. Uttering a shrill screech of malignant rage, he leaped forward, winding one hand in the flowing tresses, uplifting a blood-dripping knife, its point threatening May's bosom.

With a faint cry she sunk back, her eyes closing in expectation of immediate death. The grasp tightened upon her hair, and she was partially lifted to her feet; but 'he blow did not descend.

A stalwart savage leaped forward, alighting beside the wounded brave, and with a single powerful blow of his clenched fist, sent him reeling away, to fall at full length on the ground. Then this savage stood over the two pale-faced maidens, with drawn knife and hatchet, waving back the savage braves that pressed around, their weapons ready; their faces distorted, their eyes glowing with the thirst for blood.

"Back!" this man thundered in the tongue of the Kickapoo. "These squaws belong to Bad Wolf. The knife that touches them must first pass through the heart of your chief."

For a moment it seemed as though this command would not be heeded. The uplifted weapons quivered and glanced in the pale, silvery rays of the moon. The savages cast a rapid glance around over the ghastly, motionless forms of their dead comrades, that, in their distorted features and limbs, seemed calling aloud for vengeance. From these, back to the tall, commanding form of Shika-chetish, as he stood over the crouching, trembling, half-fainting women, his eyes flashing back their defiance, his weapons uplifted in readiness for the collision that seemed impending.

But then the braves seemed to remember their allegiance, and as their weapons slowly sunk, they drew back, cowed by the undaunted courage of Shika-chetish. For the time, at least, the pale-faced maidens were safe.

Yet the chief kept close beside them, his eye watchful, his hand ready. Even better than they, he realized their peril. He knew that the vengeance of the Kickapoos was only partially appeased. Four of their comrades had taken up the long trail leading to the happy-hunting grounds, and there was only the spirit of one pale-face to light them along the way. Why Bad Wolf had resolved upon protecting the women, he could scarcely have told himself. In the dim moonlight he had not recognized them; nor was it probable that he would do so, since he had not met with either of them for over two years—not since they first left Barrett's for boarding-school at Leavenworth, and these two years had wrought a great change in them.

Fearing the result should the settlers discover that the Kickapoos had committed this deed, Shika-chetish gave directions for his braves to gather up their dead and obliterate all traces that could possibly serve to identify the murderers. The body of Little Billy was carefully hidden in the tall grass, and hoping that the dew and sun would soon obliterate the blood-sign, the Kickapoos glided rapidly away from the spot, several of their number coming after the main body, and hiding the trail as best they could.

Had Little Billy been less hasty in his action, this tragedy would probably never have happened. The Kickapoos were not hunting the fugitives. That afternoon a roving band of Omahas had run off several valuable ponies from the Kickapoo herds, and, taking their trail, the latter had followed it this far, when they noticed several forms advancing along the ridge. Naturally they wished to learn who these were. As the dark face rose before Little Billy, he fired instantly, believing it to belong to one of the outlaws, who had discovered them. Thus assaulted, the Kickapoos thought only of revenge. Otherwise they would have allowed the fugitives to pass them by in peace, as they were averse to gaining the ill-will of the settlers more than they had already by their slightly enigmatical behavior upon the Twin Mounds, a week previously.

As they journeyed along, Shika-chetish grew more and more uneasy. He could not help but notice the bitter, revengeful glances of the braves, more especially those bearing their dead comrade, directed toward the pale-faces. He heard too the deep mutterings, the half-audible threats, not alone against the captives, but toward any who should so far forget their creed as to shield those whose hands were red with Kickapoo blood. He heard this, and did not dare rebuke the discontents. Though as brave and daring a man as ever lived, where bodily danger alone was concerned, Shika-chetish had one great fear. The main body of the Kickapoos had been making overtures to the band under his chieftainship, to unite once more with them. Should they do so, Bad-Wolf would be but a sub-chief, while now he was a king. While this matter was unsettled he must bow more or less to the will of his braves, lest they should decide against him and return to their former tribal allegiance. He felt almost certain that his braves would demand that the captives should be delivered up to their vengeance, and he saw not how he could avoid complying. And thus all forgot the purpose for which they started forth; the Omaha horse-thieves might exult in their success, for the hour of reckoning was postponed.

Fortunately for the captives they were not obliged to go much further on foot. Some three miles from the spot of their capture, a second portion of the band was joined. These had charge of the horses, that would only have been an incumbrance to the savages while trailing their foe by moonlight.

May and Eunice were mounted upon horse-back, with a warrior riding close upon either hand, as though to guard against any attempt at escape. Fetching up the rear were several braves in charge of the dead. Each corpse was securely bound upon its animal, in an upright position, with its blanket flung over its head, hiding the staring features and blood-stains from view. The captives cast only one glance backward; the strange and unearthly sight of the dead men riding so stiffly along in their rear filled them with horror and a wild longing to rush forward at headlong speed—anything to escape that ghastly escort.

The sun had already risen when the party rode into the temporary village of the Kick-

poos. And here again the maidens were compelled to undergo a trying ordeal. As the dead braves were noticed, a wail of grief and woe went up from the squaws and papposes, quickly succeeded by a deadly yell of vengeance as the pale-faces caught their attention. And then a desperate rush was made for the captives. With difficulty the braves forced back the infuriated hags, who seemed to pay no attention to the stinging blows, even wounds, their lords and masters dealt them, intent only upon sacrificing the white squaws to the manes of their dead braves.

Panting, trembling, half-fainting, May and Eunice found themselves at length in the skin tent of Shika-chetish, who still stood their shield. But his brow darkened and grew more troubled as he listened to the tumult in the village without, the yelling, wailing and screeching of the squaws; he knew that at any moment the voices of his braves might join in the chorus, when even his life would be in danger.

"Save us—for the love of God! save us from them!" gasped May Howard, sinking at the Kickapoo's feet, her hands clasped, her voice trembling with a sickening dread of the future.

"You hear dat? You hear what brave, squaw, pappoose all say? Shika-chetish only one man—you must die!" sullenly returned the chief, scowling deeply, as he heard a loud shout come from the lips of his warriors.

Then he sprung to the lodge door and peered eagerly forth. He had understood the meaning of the shout. A body of horsemen was rapidly bearing down upon the village. For one moment he was in doubt; then his face lightened and a shrill whistle broke from his lips. Still obedient, his warriors flocked to a common center, their weapons in order. Yet they did not seem to apprehend danger, though the horsemen continued to approach at a steady gallop.

From the foremost came a single cry; it was the yell of Black John, the Road-Agent. Shika-chetish promptly replied, and then the vagabond chief and the notorious outlaw met and clasped hands like tried and warm friends. Yet neither trusted the other further than he was absolutely obliged to.

"Well, chief," said Black John, glancing keenly around, speaking in the Kickapoo tongue, for Shika-chetish was not very expert in the use of the English language, its intricacies proving too much for his guttural tongue; "how have matters gone since I've been away?"

"Bad!" was the impressive reply, "very bad! The pale-faces are growing stronger and more insolent. They think these prairies are all their own. The Kickapoos have not room to breathe in peace. We are going far away, to a land where the game is more plenty and not so wild."

"I see you have been in trouble," added Black John, keenly eyeing the stark bodies still lying out in the open air, surrounded by wailing squaws. "What does this mean? I thought you were at peace. What does this mean?"

Bad Wolf hesitated for a moment. He was tempted to tell a lie; to declare that this was the result of a battle with some of the roving Indian bands. And perhaps had he known the entire truth, he would have done so. For he did not suspect that the Road-Agent was in any manner connected with the pale-faced captives within his tent. But he concluded to tell the truth, and did so, briefly.

"Where was this? Who were they?" eagerly demanded Black John, strongly agitated. "Who was with the white squaws?"

"A little boy-man, with a head like a buffalo-bull. A devil to fight—as you can see. His one arm laid these braves low, before we could kill him."

"Little Billy!" hoarsely cried Black John, as he turned and made a gesture to his men.

"Chief, you are trying to deceive me—to throw dust in my eyes! These squaws are mine—you stole them away from my men at the hole in the prairie!"

Shika-chetish stared at the outlaw in mute amazement, as though he did not comprehend Black John's words. But then an angry glitter came into his eyes, and he replied:

"You say that I have a forked tongue. That is a lie. I do not fear to speak the truth to either friend or enemy. And since you speak of deceit, where are the horses you promised me for helping you at the Two Brothers? I made my part of the bargain good; did you? No! you rode off in the night, upon my horses; and now you come here and say that I lie!"

"Captain, I see the girls peeking at us from yonder lodge," whispered Limber Dick, at Black John's elbow.

"Wait—keep the boys ready. We may have

to fight these devils," muttered the outlaw; then turning once more to the chief; "I was wrong, Bad Wolf, and I ask your pardon. I was mad, and didn't know what I said. But this boy-man was one of those I left in charge of my captives at the den. They must have bribed him to help them escape. If that is so, and you killed him, I thank you for it. He was a traitor; it saves me the trouble of punishing him. But these white squaws—let me see them. If they are the ones I think, they must go with me. If not, they are yours."

A sullen muttering ran around the line of Kickapoos. They were scowling deeply, and preparing their weapons, as though burning for a collision. Black John made a rapid gesture. Like magic each of the Road-Agents held a revolver, cocked and ready in either hand. Between the two parties stood Shika-chetish, irresolute. He knew his antagonists, and felt that victory, if gained at all, must be accompanied by frightful loss. Waving back his braves, he said:

"It may be as you say. I know nothing of that. I only know that you promised me so many horses for a piece of work. I did it; now where are the horses?"

"Here—and they are yours, if you will give up the white squaws. If not, then you must fight for them," was the bold reply.

The Kickapoos glanced at each other, and seemed impressed. It was not every day that they gained such a prize; and besides, there might be danger in sacrificing the squaws. The settlers were already suspicious.

Bad Wolf read this decision, and like a good general, gave in. Striding to the lodge, he dragged forth the trembling captives, saying:

"Look—are these your squaws?"

"Yes!" cried Black John and Limber Dick, in a breath.

"Then they are yours—when you give me the horses," was the business-like reply.

"Come with us to the den, and you can have them then. It is a long ways to walk," hesitated Black John.

"No. We are going far away. Give us the horses now."

"Do it, Cap," muttered Limber Dick. "The animals would only leave a trail that might betray us. We can easily raise fresh ones from the settlers."

"Save us! for the love of God! do not give us up to that villain!" gasped May, shrinking back in terror.

"Horses worth heap more than squaws," coolly returned the chief.

Shrinking with terror, they strove to flee, but with one bound, the Road-Agents secured them. Half-fainting, they sunk helpless into the strong arms.

And the Vulture and the Coyote laughed diabolically.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRAP SPRUNG.

ALL was still in the "basin," though hearts were beating and eyes flashing with eager anticipation as the vigilantes crouched down amidst the undergrowth, their rifles cocked and ready for use the moment Curly Tostivan should give the signal.

Half an hour before the look-outs posted upon the ridge brought word that a number of footmen were approaching the retreat. Curly at once stole out to reconnoiter them, and made out that they were the band of Black John, and that they had May Howard and Eunice Lee with them as captives. Without bothering his mind trying to account for their being dismounted, Curly hastened back to the man-trap.

He was now standing beside Ed. Ware, a revolver ready to remind the outlaw of the duty expected of him. To save his life, Ware had agreed to decoy the Road-Agents into the trap. He knew the agreed-upon signals, without which being answered, Black John would not venture within.

The signals were made and answered. Black John unsuspectingly advanced. Between him and Limber Dick walked May and Eunice, jaded and worn by the long march that had lasted from morn until nearly sunset.

As the Road-Agents drew nearer, Curly Tostivan made Kent Morgan a signal. The young man, followed by a half dozen sturdy men—and among them the redoubtable Frank Kershaw—dropped into the creek, emerging from the basin on the opposite side from that where the outlaw approached.

This object was to gain the rear of the Road-Agents, and thus be enabled to cut off the retreat of such among them as survived the first springing of the trap. This bright afternoon

was to see the utter destruction of Black John's notorious band of depredators.

"Hello! there—Dutch Bill!" cried out Black John, pausing at a little distance, as though for the first time suspecting something wrong.

"Answer him—an' mind how ye do it," muttered Curly, as his pistol was pressed against Ware's side.

"Hello, Cap—what's up?"

"Is all safe? Where's the rest of the boys? How did you manage to lose these girls?"

"It's a long story, but we kin clear our skirts. That's big news too; better come on in," returned Ware.

Black John seemed satisfied and advanced.

"Leave them two to Leigh an' me," muttered Curly, in a tone barely audible to the vigilantes around him. "When I fire, you plug t'other ready, Abram?"

A nod replied, and then Curly glanced along the dark tube of death, its silver drop bearing full upon the narrow strip of white forehead left bare by the slouched hat worn by Black John. A pressure of the finger—and the death-knell was sounded.

Without a groan Black John reeled, tossing his arms aloft, then fell heavily forward, a blue, discolored spot between the eyes marking where the bullet had entered the brain.

And amidst the death-hail that hurtled so thickly around him, Limber Dick stood unscathed, one hand clutching Eunice Lee. Giant Abram had drawn a bead upon his heart, but the settler's rifle missed fire.

And then—with the shrieks and agonized groans of his fellow comrades, with the wild, exultant yells of the vigilantes, both in the basin and those under Kent Morgan who now leaped up from the tall grass in the rear of the Road-Agents; with all this around him, Limber Dick did not lose his presence of mind. Quick as thought he flung one arm around Eunice, drawing her close to his breast, while his right hand clutched a long knife, the keen point resting upon her bosom.

"Hold!" he cried, his clear voice ringing like a clarion note, a sneer of derisive contempt worn in the moment of dread peril, playing around his lips. "The first move you make will be the death of this girl. True, you can shoot me, but you can't kill me so instantly but that I will have time to drive this knife home to her heart."

"Don't shoot, boys!" cried Curly, anxiously. "What do you want, anyhow? Don't be a durned fool, man!"

"Thank you—I think I am acting very sensibly, indeed. What do I want? My life, of course. I'm not yearning for death—nor do I suppose this lady is. Still, if you kill me, you kill her, also. Pledge me your honor that you will give me one hour's start, and I will free her. Then you may catch me—if you can," coolly added Limber Dick.

"Let me talk with the boys, fust," said Curly.

"All right—but no treachery, for—"

That was the last word Limber Dick ever spoke. A slender form suddenly arose behind him, and clutching his knife-hand, wrenched the arm far back from the maiden's breast. At the same instant there was a smothered report—a tiny puff of smoke, and with a snarling cry, Limber Dick fell dead to the ground.

"Hurra! Bully for Kershaw!" yelled Curly, leaping forward in ecstasy.

It was indeed Frank Kershaw who had performed this bold and adroit deed. He had crept through the grass and gained the rear of Limber Dick, unobserved, nerved to desperation, doubtless, by the imminent peril of Eunice, whose beauty and wit had made a deep impression on Frank's heart.

There is little more to be added save what the reader's imagination can readily supply.

The safe return of their children, turned the scale in favor of Thomas Howard and his wife. Both were well and hearty at the double wedding that occurred on Christmas Eve of the same year. Maurice Clyde, the detective—the same who has been known as Kent Morgan in these pages—wedded May, the black-eyed. And Eunice, of the golden locks, took Frank Kershaw for better or worse, finding him much better than might be expected from the part he has played in these pages, but that one act of boldness, by which he rescued his future wife, greatly altered Frank, and he is no longer the gasconading braggart of doubtful courage.

The "Outlaw's Retreat," or prairie sink, still exists. In July, 1873, I visited it, and the description in the text is taken from nature; and the leading incidents in this story are still fresh in the memory of many of my Kansas friends.

THE END.

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